



The central research question is: What are the factors conducive to female immigrants' collective mobilization for human rights? More specifically, what are the factors in the women's life course that account for mobilization and what are the structural factors in the host country that support this effort?

This ethnographic study contributes to the literature on domestic work and migration by examining the subjective aspects of the Latinas' experience as they evolve as activists and mobilize for their rights as workers, particularly from the perspective of identity formation across the immigrant life cycle. The study also shows that domestic work conditions are determined by the specific relationship between poverty, human mobility and gender at a local and national level.

# WORK AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN THE LIFE STORIES OF LATINA DOMESTIC WORKERS

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Dedication

To my sons: Diego, Marcello and Luciano

&

To my friend Judith

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## **Prologue**

I have been a migrant most of my life.

I left my home country, Brazil, when I was 15 to go to school in England and pursue what was characterized then as a “European” education. In so doing, I followed in the footsteps of many of the women in my family who came before me. My family had migrated from Portugal to Brazil two generations before and had built an important industrial complex. They were mainly in the textile business, and, at that time, England was the best destination for the men to learn the business and for the women to “polish” their education.

I never returned to Brazil to live. Rather, I spent a number of years in Europe (England, Germany and Spain) and then went to Mexico to study Anthropology, which was not quite what was expected of an upper class young lady at the time (1977).

While in Spain, I attended the Latin American Studies program at the University of Seville and took a course on indigenous populations in contemporary Latin America. I was particularly interested on the Mayas in Mexico and Guatemala, given all I had studied about their great civilization, and was deeply moved by their current situation of poverty and exclusion. My readings included famous Mexican anthropologists, such as Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla. The complexity of the anthropological perspective on these indigenous groups allowed me to delve into their cultural world and, at the same time, into the effects of poverty in their everyday lives. I decided I wanted to pursue a carrier in anthropology and seek professional development that would allow me to contribute to applications that might improve these people’s lives or others like them.

In Mexico, I went to the *Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (National School of Anthropology and History), earned my degree, and worked for many years in the government, mostly in poverty reduction programs. While in Mexico, I married a Brazilian who had also migrated, and we had three children and built a satisfying life together. Then, twelve years ago we migrated to the States when my husband was offered a job in Washington DC.

During my childhood in Brazil, I grew up surrounded by domestic workers, which was pervasive among the households at the higher end of the social strata. At home and elsewhere around me, it was common to have a cook, a cleaner, a nanny, a lady that takes care of the laundry (quite a complicated business then) and a driver. My parents were very respectful towards our domestic workers, holding a humanitarian perspective where they fostered education for the domestics' children, favorable work conditions, access to health care, etc. However, I now realize that this perspective, while generous, was somewhat paternalistic. As I became involved in the domestic workers' lives and, at the same time, pursued my career in anthropology, I realized the limitations of the paternalistic perspective, which addresses the problem individually, while denying its deep and complex social roots.

In Mexico, after I got married and established my own family, my life style was markedly different from that of my parents. My husband and I were both professionals, and while we also had domestic workers, a common feature of the upper-middle class, I established close relationships to the women who worked in my house, engaged with their private lives and tried to help them and their household members. It was often striking to me that these women's problems and struggles were, in many instances,

similar to one another and that many seemed “destined” to repeat the same saga. Most came from rural areas to work in the city at a very young age, and they sent money back home. Once in the city, they would start dating and often get pregnant, only to be left by their partners soon thereafter. Additionally, most employers were abusive and had them work long hours for very low salaries.

Another important aspect I observed in relation to domestic service around me was the severe discrimination that these women were subject to. Several factors played a part. Having indigenous phenotypes and country-side origins, being female, and performing domestic work, which is not even recognized legally in Mexico as “work,” placed them in a vulnerable position in the social structure where discrimination was normalized. The workers themselves usually internalized this daily experience to such an extent that they did not even recognize the possibility of having different lives. Often too, their lives in the rural communities were very harsh, and they would comment that they liked it better in the city, even when, from my perspective, they suffered under such exploitative situations and discriminatory behaviors. But, of course, I did not know much about their living conditions in their regions of origin.

Together with the women that worked at my house and others outside, I became proactive, developing a network of domestic workers to help them find jobs and to insure they had decent work conditions. If a woman was mistreated, she could contact us, and we would help her find another job. Sometimes, we would provide room and board if the domestic worker had to leave a job because she was escaping abuse.

When my husband and I moved to the Washington DC area, as international officers, we had the option of bringing somebody from Mexico with us to work in our household

with a visa linked to ours, much like diplomats do. We offered the job to the woman who had worked with us for many years, Neli. She accepted immediately, even when she had to leave her three children behind, ages 6, 4 and 2. She considered it as an opportunity to earn more money and possibly offer her children an education since this would be impossible in Mexico where she was working and raising the children by herself after being abandoned by her husband.

Though I had migrated a number of times before I moved from Mexico to the US, the experience was quite different this time as I had a family and a professional life before moving to the US. Once here, I had to rebuild my own life goals and projects as I was following my husband's work. Adapting to the new culture and helping my children through the process – and my husband as well – I realized the complexity of negotiating different cultural perceptions and navigating a society that, although I had visited often throughout my life, I knew much less about than I thought.

At the same time, observing Neli's experience as well as that of her friends' - as she quickly established a network with women that were also Latina immigrant domestic workers - I became interested in understanding how the relationship to a new context affected the way these women perceived themselves and, in turn, the way they interacted with the new social setting. "Did the U.S facilitate the women's awareness of their human rights?" I wondered.

To answer such questions, I decided to go back to school and pursue a graduate degree. As part of my graduate work in Applied Anthropology, I approached *Casa de Maryland*, a not for profit organization in the Washington DC Metropolitan area, in Maryland, that tends to low-income Latino immigrants. Through my advisor Judith

Freidenberg, I worked as a volunteer in Casa's then new women's program that aided Latina immigrant women in securing employment. Through this involvement, I began to wonder about the transformations of these women's work identities in a transnational space.

The stories that I narrate here reveal how the women I followed made sense of those transformations. By making them visible and offering them to *Casa de Maryland*, I hope to contribute to the program. And, by teasing out the factors that affect the transformations of work identities, I will add to the literature on gender and immigration.

## **Introduction: Description of the Study**

E.C. does not recall life without work. In her native Nicaragua, she was raised in a small village, first by her grandmother and later by her mother. Every household member had to work both inside the house and outside in the fields. Attending school was hardly ever an option. As a teenager, she was sent to the city to work for a family acquaintance, with no salary, just room and board. Though she managed to move on to a paid job as a domestic worker, long hours and very low wages made her decide she wanted to migrate *North*, where, she heard, one could earn more money. In the US, she settled in the DC Metropolitan area and became involved with *Casa de Maryland* in her search for a job. She soon joined *Casa's* women's group, which at this time was called *Mujeres al Poder* (Women in Power). She became an activist in the group, and together with other members, formed the *Comité de Mujeres Buscando Justicia* (Committee of Women Seeking Justice), moving from organizing to help Latina immigrants navigate the job market to organizing to help them mobilize for their collective rights as domestic workers.

E.C. is part of a growing number of low-income Latina immigrants that have migrated to the US alone, without any other household member or acquaintance, from her home country, in this case Nicaragua, to earn a living and send money to her family left behind. Once in the US, she chose to join a group of immigrant women in an employment program. With the group, she became aware of her rights as an immigrant worker and different ways to advocate for them.

## **Latinos in the USA**

E.C. is one of several million Latina/os in the US. The 2010 Census accounted for 50.5 million Latinos in the United States, making up 16.3% of the total population. The nation's Latino<sup>1</sup> population, which was 35.3 million in 2000, grew by 46.3% over the last decade. Within the larger, national context, the Latino population accounted for most of the nation's growth—56%—from 2000 to 2010.

The 2010 Latino population in the US is composed mainly of two groups: people born in the US with Latino heritage (native-born Latinos) and foreign-born Latinos, which include all persons who were born in Latin America and presently live in the US. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, in 2009, 37% of the Latino population was foreign-born. The demographics of these two groups vary considerably. As shown in the table below, native-born Latinos are much younger than the foreign-born. More specifically, 26% of the native-born total population is younger than 18 years of age while only 4% of the foreign-born total population fits this age demographic. Additionally, while native-born Latinos are distributed evenly by sex, the difference being slightly above 1 percentage point, males prevail among foreign-born Latinos by almost 7 percentage points. Foreign-born Latinos are poorer too. Poverty rate for adults 18 to 64 years of age reached 22% for this group in 2009 as compared to 16% for native-born Latinos. Foreign-born Latinos also have the highest school drop-out rates among the foreign-born, reaching 27% for Central Americans and 22 % for Mexicans. By contrast, native-born Latinos have less than a 5% school drop-out rate. Although growth rates of

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<sup>1</sup> I will use Latino/a to refer to people who trace their origin to Latin America. An explanation of the different implications of the terms Latinos and Hispanic is offered in the glossary.

the Latino population are now higher among the native-born, the increase among foreign-born Latinos reached almost 30% between 2000 and 2009 (2010 Census).

<b>Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States, 2009</b>								
<b>Table 10. Hispanic Nativity Groups, by Sex and Age: 2009</b>								
Universe: 2009 Hispanic resident population								
<b>Foreign Born</b>				<b>Native Born</b>				
<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>% of all foreign-born</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Percent of all foreign born</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Percent of all native born</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Percent of all native born</b>
Younger than 18	713,122	3.9	669,276	3.7	7,849,294	25.9	7,462,527	24.6
18 and older	8,934,851	49.4	7,752,027	42.9	7,482,981	24.7	7,484,066	24.7
								0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,647,973</b>	<b>53.4</b>	<b>8,421,303</b>	<b>46.6</b>	<b>15,332,275</b>	<b>50.6</b>	<b>14,946,593</b>	<b>49.4</b>

Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of 2009 American Community Survey (1% IPUMS)

At the state level, the Latino population doubled over the past decade in nine states.

Among those with the highest rates include a swath in the southeast United States—Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee and South Carolina. The Latino population also more than doubled in Maryland: In 2010, there were 471 thousand Latinos, up 106% over the decade. Poverty rates are disproportionately high among Latinos in the state, reaching 16% of the total, as compared to 2% and 6% for non-Hispanic whites and blacks respectively.

Although the recent recession slowed down immigration of Latinos to the US considerably, particularly unauthorized migration (Passel and Cohn, 2010), Latinos have already become the largest minority and are the fastest growing segment of US population. At the same time, the number of Latina immigrants in the US (and elsewhere) has increased steadily, particularly since the 1970s (Sicremi, 2011). Moreover, Latinas started heading North not only to join their families but frequently arriving by themselves to earn a living and send money to those left behind (Martínez, 2008; Zhou, 2002).

These changes in the gender composition of migration flows are often related to the rise in labor demands in the service sector along with other reasons, one being the undocumented status of many female immigrants, which creates a demand for cheap labor. Given the barriers to accessing other jobs that require specific skills and circumstances such as speaking English and obtaining a work permit, Latina immigrants in the US often find domestic service employment in private households and make up a growing proportion of home-based, US employees, including housekeepers, nannies and caregivers (for children, the elderly and those with disabilities) (Michel, 2010; Martínez 2008).

These domestic workers, however, are often exposed to situations of vulnerability created by violation of their human rights. Conditions of isolation intrinsic to the job as well as barriers to accessing other jobs, such as language, employment skills, work permits and scarce knowledge of their rights and how to exercise them, make these immigrant domestic workers particularly susceptible to exploitation and abuse (Martínez, 2008; Romero, 2002).

Recent studies reveal that immigrant women are more likely than their male counterparts to engage in community organizations that interface with US institutions (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003, 2008; Cantor, 2010). In the case of domestic work, migrant women are taking the lead in fighting for legal protections in the United States. They are playing a key role in campaigns for domestic workers' rights and have already been successful in at least two cases: New York State and Montgomery County, MD (Michel, 2010).

My ethnographic study attempts to understand the circumstances under which the migration experience leads to the development of activism among five low-income Latina immigrant women in Montgomery County, MD who have become activists, as they move from seeking individual well-being to navigating the job market of the destination country to advocating for collective rights as domestic workers. More specifically, the study examines the subjective aspects of the experience from the perspective of cultural traditions/categories of identity across the immigrant life cycle.

This study uses an ethnographic approach to data gathering, combining participant observation with life history interviews to document the process the actors traverse from their lives in the country of origin to their migration and settlement in the host country.

### **Statement of the Problem and Research Question**

Since the 1980s, social science research has emerged on gender and immigration to the US as a result, in part, of the pronounced increase in immigration to the US and the development of critical feminist theories. Scholarship on Latino immigration and gender has evolved also throughout the past decades, providing much needed insight about migration outcomes for Latina immigrants and their effects on gender roles. Nonetheless, scholars have focused their work mainly on Latinas in their host communities, as workers, family members and community organizers.

Through transnationalism, theories have contributed to understanding how Latinas organize their lives across borders; however, much work is still needed to understand how the perspective of the immigrant life cycle (defined as life in the country of origin, the process of migration and life in the host country) inform migration outcomes for

immigrant Latina women. Although transnational theories have contributed largely to understanding immigrants' experiences and have become an indispensable part of any analysis of immigrant communities across the globe, further research is needed to develop a more grounded analysis of immigrants' experiences to understand how their transnational cultural frames shape the way they perceive and interact with/experience the community of residence (Pérez 2002; Levitt 2001),

In order to contribute to this understanding, this study looks at the life stories of five low-income Latina immigrant domestic worker activists in Montgomery County, MD, to document their experience and understand the factors that lead/influence their civic mobilization for collective rights.

Drawing from the assumption that female migration is a human rights issue, the central research question is: What are the factors conducive to female immigrants' collective mobilization for human rights? More specifically, what are the structural factors in the host country (i.e. labor markets, civil society organizations and immigration policies) that contribute to this mobilization? What are the factors in the women's life courses that account for mobilization?

I address these questions at *Casa de Maryland*, a non-government organization that houses a support program for Latina immigrant domestic workers. The program has two main objectives: the first one is to develop an alternative for the women's income earnings through a cooperative, and the second one is to advocate for the rights of domestic workers. The women that participated in the program formed a committee that, together with a *Casa* staff member, is in charge of planning and leading the program's

activities. The committee is named *Comité de Mujeres Buscando Justicia* (Committee of Women Seeking Justice).

In tending to the needs of the women that arrived at *Casa*, the program evolved throughout the years from responding to the women's needs of seeking and finding work to concentrating in advocating for legislation to protect domestic work in Montgomery County, MD. Different life experiences brought these women to the US, but a number of commonalities unite them: they were all poor and marginalized in their countries of origin, and they all migrated to the US searching for a better life, for employment that would allow them to fulfill their most basic needs and provide for families here and back home

They arrive at *Casa* with hopes of fulfilling this purpose—either to find a job or access services—as well as to learn a skill that would better prepare them for the job market, such as English classes, computer skills, etc. The history of the women's group as documented here explores a change in the needs that the women bring to *Casa's* meetings. In the process of establishing themselves in the new society, their demands shift from seeking to fulfill their individual needs (biography), those which brought them here, which are linked to their lives in their countries of origin, to working towards the collective well-being of the new social group they become part of as they settle in the US as Latina immigrant domestic workers.

This study documents the meaning of work in the women's lives to understand their civic mobilization within the context of the domestic workers program at *Casa*. Through the immigrant life course, this study argues that their perception of work moves from a gendered occupation labeled as women's work, and thus economically devalued, both

within the household and outside, as both unpaid and paid, to that of work that is regulated and implies rights and obligations. For the research participants, the awareness of having rights and being able to exercise them leads, I further argue, to joining efforts to help others through civic mobilization.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research shows how the women's migration experiences influences the process of seeking individual well-being - and that of their families - to organizing for collective rights as workers in the country of destination. The exploration of such processes contributes to the emerging literature on the impact of migration on women's understanding of their rights as well as how this understanding develops into a migrants' collective rights activism. In turn, the process of identity transformations allows for a fuller understanding of changes in gender roles in the context of class and human rights struggles (Dagnino, 1998).

Finally, while most studies on transnational immigrant women in the US present a synchronic perspective of the women's experience as immigrants, this diachronic study of identity formation and transformation among transnational Latina immigrants' experience in the labor market will allow researchers to grasp the interpretive cultural frames these women bring with them through which they make sense of their transnational everyday lives (Levitt, 2001).

## **Summary of Chapters**

In order to provide a brief overview of the study, this introduction has included the following: the purpose, statement of the problem, research question, and significance of the research. Chapter 1 presents data on immigration flows from Latin America to the US and discusses the most important aspects of the conceptual approaches to low-income Latina immigrants in the US, providing the context for the analysis of the life histories of Latina immigrant, domestic workers. Chapter 2 provides a discussion of the conceptual framework that informs the analysis of the data gathered and the description of the research design, data collection and data analysis procedures. Chapter 3 describes my case study and findings from preliminary fieldwork, using data from participant observation and archival records. Additionally, chapter 3 discusses structural factors that contribute to understanding Latina domestic workers mobilization for their rights. Chapters 4 to 8 provide a chronological description of the women's life histories as workers and how they organize these experiences. Finally, chapter 9 documents and interprets the findings that contribute to the literature and chapter 10 presents the conclusions.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Immigration to the US from Latin America**

Immigration has become part of 21<sup>st</sup> century daily life and constitutes a structural component of the world's socio-economic system. In the US, immigration has been fundamental to its formation as a nation-state. Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigrants have come and settled in the US from different countries of the world. Although the flow has been almost continuous, the socio-economic context for immigration to the US has changed dramatically. Some countries that for decades had sent immigrants to the US are nowadays becoming receiving countries as is the case with Italy or Germany. Other countries, particularly in Latin America and Asia, have sent immigrants to the US continuously since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have persisted in doing so into the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which abolished the national origins quota system that had structured American immigration policy since the 1920s largely influenced the changes in the flows of immigrants to the US.

The Act replaced the quota system for one that focused on immigrants' skills and family relationships with citizens or residents of the US, which largely resulted in new immigration from non-European nations, changing the ethnic make-up of the United States. Immigration doubled between 1965 and 1970 and doubled again between 1970 and 1990. The most dramatic effect was the shift from immigration from Europe to Asia

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of Mexico, there are populations of Mexican origin that have always been here.

and Central and South America.<sup>3</sup> Due in part to the large geographical border shared with Mexico, to increased poverty, and to the prevailing socio-economic conditions in the region, Latin Americans keep entering the US at a faster pace than any other immigrant group. Among the total foreign-born population living in the US in 2009, more than 46% were born in Latin America (Pew Hispanic, 2009).

Presently, Latin Americans are not only the largest minority group settled in the US, but they are also the largest immigrant group. Currently 16% of the total US population, Latin Americans are also the fastest growing segment (US Census, 2010).

The continuous flow of immigrants from Latin America to the US has developed in response to significant changes such as the diversity of national origin and settlement of the Latino community. In terms of country of origin, up until mid-twenty century, Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans were the predominant nationalities among Latinos. Although Mexicans are still by far the largest segment of the Latino population, other nationalities have grown considerably. Since the 1980s, civil war torn Central America triggered movement from these countries towards the US. Nowadays, Central Americans account for 8.1% of Latinos in the US (2010 Census). Additionally, the 1980s and 90s also brought immigrants from a number of South American countries, though in smaller numbers (currently, 5.6% of Latinos according to the 2010 US Census), who have also contributed to the diversity of the US Latino community. This movement is due, in part, to structural adjustment policies that increased poverty and inequality in these countries triggering a desire for migration.

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/1965\\_immigration\\_and\\_nationality\\_act.html](http://library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/1965_immigration_and_nationality_act.html) for full text and articles about the act.

In terms of settlement, Latinos have expanded to many states beyond the more traditional, historical destinations, which have been California, Texas, New York and Miami. In fact, the Latino population has doubled over the past decade in nine states, and among those with the highest participation rates include a swath in the southeast United States—Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee and South Carolina. Employment opportunities in industries that attract immigrant labor (low-skilled jobs) drove new comers to these states as well as the increasing employment scarcity in areas that had previously been prime immigrant destinations.

### **Latinas in the US**

Another demographic change is the increase in women as a proportion of Latinos (and among immigrants in general) that has grown steadily over the past 25 years. The proportion of women among new immigrants rose from 47% in 1990, to 55% in 2009 (Hess et al., 2011). Among Mexicans, which add up to 66% of the total number of Latinos in the US (Pew Hispanic, 2009), between 1999 and 2004, 1.1 million Mexican born women reported arriving to the US, as compared with 300,000 between 1975 and 1980. Concurrently, Mexicans comprise the single largest country of origin for female immigrants (Fry, 2006; AIC, 2008; Woodrow Wilson, Bada et al., 2010).

The prevailing profile of Latina immigrant women described above is due in part to the constraining structural context of limited economic resources and opportunities, severe economic crises in 1982, 1994 and 2008, the limitations imposed by gender and gender relations, growing female networks and a culture of migration, prevalent in most sending communities from Mexico and Central America (Ibarra, 2003). These

communities, in general, have witnessed the largest flow of migrants to the US during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The sharp increase in female immigration among Latinos has continued into the 21st century and has impacted the current understanding of immigrant settlement and adaptation. First, the increase points towards a trend of permanent settlement. Women are more likely to stay in the host country since unlike traditional male labor migration that has tended to be temporary, the arrival of women has shown a significant impact on family formation, child rearing and community building (Zhou, 2002). Women become income providers for the family, often for children back home and in the host country, and given that economic constraints in the countries of origin generally mean very low salaries for unskilled labor, particularly women, their possibilities of return are scarce.

Second, the increase in female migration redefines gender roles and family relations, creating tension and new issues in gender relations. Scholars interested in Latinas' experience as transnational immigrants started pointing to the transformatory, oppositional or transnational identity formation as an example of "resistance." They have argued that employment affects domestic relations and the distribution of power within and outside the household, creating a gendered (in spite of gender ideologies) resilience to change, by, on one hand, joining the public sphere through employment and thus earning money, but on the other, maintaining the patriarchal hierarchy within the family realm, where established relations of power are not challenged (Ibarra, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

Third, the increase in female migration implies that immigrant women maintain close links to their countries of origins; these especially seem to be more persistent over time

because these women send money to families being raised away from them (Gammage, 2002; Zhou, 2002). Although the transnational ties that create transnational families are not a new phenomenon, the increase in female migration has changed women's role in it. They have become income producers of split-homeland households (Basch et al., 1994; Parrenas and Salazar, 2001). As Latinas become more visible in the workplace, in the community and at home, they tend to shape the processes of migration.

Also important to note is that Latinas (particularly from Mexico and Central America) fare worse than their peer female immigrants from other regions of the world. They have the lowest level of education attainment, the highest participation in the labor force, the lowest income and the highest poverty rates. For Mexico, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic, which are among the 10 top countries of origin for the foreign-born population, the number of immigrant women with less than a high school diploma reached 61%, 55% and 40% respectively, compared to 11% for the native-born. At the same time, labor force participation for women nationals of these countries has increased at a faster pace than any other nationality, while income for Mexican, Salvadoran and Dominican born women rank the lowest among these countries of origins. As shown below, median income for female immigrants from these countries are 37%, 27% and 25% lower respectively than the median income for native-born women. Female immigrants from Mexico receive the lowest median income of all categories, including native-born (ACS, 2008).

**Figure 12: Median Income of Native-Born & Foreign-Born Women & Men in the Labor Force, Age 16+, by Top 10 Countries of Origin, 2008**



Finally, female immigrants from Mexico had the highest poverty rate among the top 10 countries of origin at 28.5%, followed by the Dominican Republic at 25 % and El Salvador at 18%, well above the 14% for native-born women (ACS, 2008).

As described above, due in part to restricted human capital and often to their undocumented status, Latina immigrants are likely to be employed for unskilled jobs that require no English proficiency. Nonetheless, the occupational segregation of the job market offers different employment opportunities for immigrant women. While farm work and construction prevails for men, Latina immigrant women are more likely to be employed in service jobs, overwhelmingly in the informal sector, which is low-paying, insecure and offers no basic benefits. Furthermore, large percentages of Latina immigrants end up in household service jobs, where no mobility is possible (Menjivar, 1999; Fry, 2006; and de los Ríos, 2008).

Domestic work has become one of the most common occupations for low-income Latina women. On one hand, back in their home countries, women are familiar with this occupation even when they were not previously employed as domestic workers. They often grow up helping their mothers take care of the house and tend to their younger siblings. Additionally, restricted by human capital resource factors, such as only a few years of education and a low English proficiency, Latina immigrants turn to domestic work as their best option to earn money to send back home to family and children (Freidenberg, 2005).

On the other hand, the growing demand for domestic service in the US offers an option to enter the job market and earn money (Schoeni, 1998; Power et al., 1998). Several factors account for this soaring demand: increased employment of professional women in professional and higher paid jobs, the preference for personalized care providers for children in middle and upper class families and the growing income inequality in the US that allows more families to pay for domestic work (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001 and 2003).

Moving to the US and working as domestic workers often means performing the same job one would have at the family household but in a completely different cultural context. In contrast to the most important countries of origin (Mexico, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic), domestic work is legally established in the US; workers have rights and obligations and a more formal structure that protects them from exploitation (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Nonetheless, Latina immigrant domestic workers are exposed to situations of vulnerability and violation of their human rights. Specifically, they are susceptible to exploitation and abuse through: conditions of isolation intrinsic to the job

such as live-in arrangements; barriers to accessing other jobs such as language, skills and obtaining a work permit; and scarce knowledge of their rights and how to exercise them (Martínez, 2008; Romero, 2008).

At the same time, in spite of the lack of awareness of rights and how to exercise them, recent studies reveal that immigrant women are more likely than their male counterparts to engage in community organizations that interface with US institutions to mobilize for their rights (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Cantor, 2010). An important number of immigrant workers are finding their way to becoming rights conscious, fighting for their rights and helping others do so. In the case of domestic work, migrant women are taking the lead in fighting for legal protections in the United States. They are playing a key role in campaigns for domestic workers' rights and have already been successful in at least two cases: New York State and Montgomery County, MD (Mitchell, 2010).

These experiences are being well documented in order to further, among other reasons, the understanding of how domestic workers organize (Hondagneu Sotelo, 2008), the role of civil society organizations in these processes (Hess et al., 2011) and the new models of analysis to address a political incorporation of immigrants that encompasses more than a formal inclusion in the political system via citizenship acquisition, political representation and civic engagement (Cantor, 2011).

My research introduces the perspective of Latina immigrant workers themselves as they evolve in their relationship to the host society through migration and settlement. In so doing, the ethnographic portrait produced here is an effort to more fully understand the factors that lead to these Latina immigrant women's collective mobilization as workers, which has not yet been fully addressed in the scholarly literature.

## **Literature Review: Understanding Latinas' Experiences in the US**

Contemporary research on Latina Immigration to the US has advanced fast both theoretically and empirically during the past three decades. During the 1970s, when the number of women coming to the US started increasing, analysts informed by assimilation theories, were focused on the process of integration of women to the host society, emphasizing the benefits of wage work, both economically and socially, and how these aspects contributed to Latina's permanence here as well as to their overall integration into the host society (Torres, 1998; Foner, 2002). A second research phase looked at women's insertion in the new society in a more problematized way, in terms of the effects of the socioeconomic changes on family structure and gender roles. At the same time, scholars started looking beyond the relationship to the host society, to address differences and similarities in the ways immigrant women connected to both cultural contexts, the homeland and the host society (Levitt, 2001; Glick Schiller and Fouron, 2001; Pérez, 2004).

Proponents of transnational theories started addressing the need to understand how the experience at home and in the host country merge in the immigrants' life course, considering emerging global relations of capital and the relationship between power and the hegemonic construction of culture and practice. Beginning with the proponents of the concepts themselves, anthropologists Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1994) focused on studying communities across borders. The purpose was to develop insights into transnational processes based on the concrete historical experiences of two case studies: immigrants from the Eastern Caribbean and Haiti in New York.

Following this model, scholars have produced insightful works on transmigrant communities, developing innovative concepts such as long-distance nationalism among Haitians in New York (Schiller and Fouron, 2001), social remittances between transnational villagers living in Jamaican Plain in Boston and in Miraflores in the Dominican Republic (Levitt, 2001) and multi-national households and dislocations among Filipina domestic workers around the globe (Parrenas and Salazar, 2001). These represent just a few of the many studies done and still being conducted using this transmigrant model.

Scholars interested in Latinas' experience as transnational immigrants started pointing at the transformatory, oppositional or transnational identity formation as an example of "resistance" (Ibarra, 2003). Focusing on women, scholars have argued that employment affects domestic relations and the distribution of power within and outside the household. Pessar's gendered reading of the Dominican family processes show how relations between men and women have changed once women join the waged work force. She adds though that gender ideologies are "resilient" to change and often prevail in household roles (1995). Similarly, Schiller and Fouron (2001) analyze extensively the changing role of Haitian women as transborder citizens. The authors claim that although women participate in processes of social reproduction that re-create the gender hierarchy through their transnational kin network, they also challenge the prevailing hierarchies – not only of gender but of class as well – through their participation in transnational grassroots organizations.

Turning to Mexicans, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994, 2001, and 2008) argues that women's migration processes have created a gendered transition that is helping erode women's

acceptance of traditional gender relations. In her extensive work on domestic workers in California, Hondagneu-Sotelo shows that in migrating and working in the US, Latinas challenge patriarchal constraints, including the unequal division of household labor, and try to renegotiate them.

More recent ethnographies refer to the empowerment of becoming income earners once in the US. Latinas' self esteem and social and symbolic capital increases, placing them in a better position to negotiate gender relations. Furthermore, researchers argue that encountering other immigrant women in the new community has a transformative role; from other immigrant women, new Latina immigrants learn about their rights in the US as well as skills that contribute to them becoming more independent, such as driving (Correa and Castro, 2006; Pérez and Domínguez, 2009). Latinas are thus positively transformed in their relations with men and, essentially, gain more power.

Contributing to these findings, my ethnographic work shows that although these women are often income earners in the country of origin, domestic work and often other unskilled jobs that low-income women perform in the informal sectors of these economies are not regulated, and even when they are, there is no access to exercise their rights. The women's identity as workers is thus positively transformed in the process of migrating and settling in the country of residence, where performing the same job in a new social context produces a different meaning for them, that allows them to perceive their jobs as regulated and respected as much as other jobs that are performed by other people around them.

Presenting a more complex picture, other scholars argue that this transition is not devoid of conflict. Challenging patriarchic structures within the household, Mexican

immigrant women often face deteriorating family relations. To trace this development, there was first a move to go beyond functionalist acculturation approaches to Mexican American patriarchic family models that identified Mexican cultural norms with a rigid segregation of roles in the family, where the man is the breadwinner and the woman is a submissive mother-wife. Then, there was a turn in analysis to look at American family models with more “modern” egalitarian family values; Zavella (1987) argues that the Mexican American family ideology is complex and not homogeneous as commonly argued. First, there is diversity within the Mexican American community in terms of regional origins and foreign versus US born accounts for different family traditions. Second, the US family structure is patriarchal notwithstanding the ideals of egalitarianism, and Mexican American families are not isolated, static entities in respect to this interaction with US society. Rather, they are immersed in a specific cultural context with which they intermingle and relate with and thus are constantly changing. Working with Mexican American cannery workers, Zavella argues that both structural constraints on women’s lives and the ideology of family values reinforce subordination. She asserts further, that beyond the cultural issues, class is a main determinant in the families’ perceptions of women’s work. Similarly, D’Aubeterre and others (2000) have argued through their ethnographic studies that there are “...spaces of change and continuities in the construction of the feminine” (66).

Taking the argument of transnational empowerment or “resistance” outside the household, Basch and Glick-Schiller (1994) maintain that these women cope with their realities by forging “multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (7). In this way, immigrant women create a dual sense of self.

They belong simultaneously to different social structures of oppression, resisting against racism in the US and classism in Mexico at the same time (Basch et al., 1994; Rouse, 1991).

Similarly, transnational perspectives informing ethnographic research with immigrant Latina women point to yet another aspect of their shifting identities. Their perceptions of work relations speak to less tangible changes that seem to empower them as well. Although a number of authors point to the exploitative work relations the women are subject to once in the US, particularly referring to domestic work, this perspective does not bring in the women's accounts of harsher situations in their home countries (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Romero, 1992). Latina immigrants refer constantly to the different way they are treated by their employers when compared to the lived experiences back home, both as household workers and as domestic workers. They also seem to find dignity and meaning in their work, even when some of their jobs' remunerations are comparatively low in the market (Ibarra, 2000; Bebianno Simões, 2006).

For Latina immigrants, work provides for material well-being and as documented in this study, many migrate for this very reason. From my perspective, work is central to the participant women's identities. They grow up working at home, work for others since their teenage years, migrate in search of work that yields a better income, and become activists for better work conditions. Once they move, first from the rural to the urban areas, and then to the US, they interact with the prevailing social practices in the new environment, negotiating their relationship to work and their identity as workers.

Although transnational theories have contributed largely to understanding immigrants' experiences and have become an indispensable part of any analysis of immigrant

communities across the globe, they seem to lack conceptual tools that allow for a more grounded analysis of immigrants' experience. A number of scholars working with Latina immigrant women have argued for conceptual tools that address transnational migration as a nuanced process and to document the diversity of experiences.

Recent work done with narratives of immigrant Mexican women's border crossings challenge transnationalism's prevailing perspective of positive outcomes in terms of better lives and a more positive identity. Looking at memories of home and of the journey across the border, Ibarra (2003) concludes that these experiences alter their sense of themselves in ways that are not always positive and "shed light on experiences that generally remain invisible, unknown and unimagined" within the new context of the resident country (276). Further, these narratives elicit the tensions inherent in moving across political borders such as the "power-laden spaces that at once hold women's hopes for the future as well as a violence that explodes their imaginings" (276).

Understanding border crossings both physically and as a metaphor has been shown to be a useful conceptual tool to understand the experience of Latina immigrant women residing in the US. From the physical experience of crossing the border that shapes their perception as the "bloodied terrain of the borderlands that lie somewhere between leaving and arriving" (interview cited in Ibarra 2003) to the crisscrossing of social borders spaces where identities of gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, age and politics, among others, are contested and negotiated, immigration for these women means moving constantly in a transnational social field across physical and social borders that link their home country to that of the country of residence.

Baker (2004) also offers an innovative perspective of the adaptive process of Mexican immigrant women as they arrive and settle in new communities in Iowa. Looking at the changing global material conditions that demand changes in their behavior, Baker analyzes the ways in which the women deal with these behavioral changes in order to carve a space for themselves in a rapidly changing context. She investigates the way in which women transgress traditional gender behavior to respond to the new conditions while still striving to maintain their traditional gender ideology that offers them a “comfort zone.” Shifting identities, Mexican immigrant women cross borders between traditional and transgressive behaviors in their everyday lives. Baker further asserts that more research needs to be done to understand how macro level phenomena affect these women once in the US. Even though research outcomes show that the “...internalization of national economies, federal policies and state and community regulations have fundamentally reconfigured the socioeconomic contexts of Mexico and the immigrant receiving communities in the US” (394), the effects on women’s experiences and agency is still a minor component of international migration research.

Specifically, in regards to the intersection/insertion of Latinas and the labor market, a number of studies contend that labor migration has unlocked opportunities for an increasing number of migrant women to seek paid work that was previously not available to them, but for many, this opportunity might come with greater social injustice and inequalities based on the intersection of gender, class and nationality (Bastia, forthcoming; Piper, 2008).

Currently many researchers are now shifting their analytical perspective, moving from migration outcomes for women that focus on the economic aspects at the macro,

community or household level to a human rights based approach that seeks to understand how women themselves evolve throughout the process of migration and what they gain and lose in this process (Piper and French, 2011). Among other variables, these studies explore the necessary emergent conditions needed to create the possibility for migrant women demanding their rights in a new environment, concluding that “...the length of the migratory experience, migrants’ cultural and social capital and the opposition to conditions in the country of origin greatly influence an awareness of rights and a sense of entitlement in migrant women” (Mora and Piper, 2011: 15).

As part of this growing body of literature that addresses the development of activism among immigrant women, recent studies show that immigrant women are more likely than their male counterparts to engage in community organizations that interface with US institutions. It has been documented that in the case of domestic work, migrant women are taking the lead in advocating for legal protection in the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003 and 2008; Cantor, 2010).

I contend that my ethnographic study contributes to the literature on migration and human rights by examining the subjective aspects of the experience of Latina immigrant workers as they evolve as activists and mobilize for their rights as workers, specifically from the perspective of identity formation across the immigrant life cycle. This study focuses on the interrelationship between work and gender in framing the identity of Latina immigrant workers.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Conceptual Considerations and Research Methodology**

Since social constructivism theorists in the social sciences put forth a notion of identity based on the premise that social realities are constructed and not given (Berger & Luckman, 1967: 84), the concept of identity has been at the core of American Studies' scholarly debates. Further, they have questioned the idea of identity and culture as linked to a geographic space and thus to one nation; in fact, American studies scholars have contributed to identity studies by conceptualizing identity as "a specific, always changing relationship to multiple, shifting, imagined communities...which despite the fact that they are always imagined, are situated in specific places at particular moments and amidst particular geographies" (Radway, 1999: 15). These developments in identity studies have been largely influenced by ideas and concepts of scholars in multiple disciplines, throughout the past three decades.

Post-structuralist and social constructivist positions developed in the 60s and 70s have profoundly influenced recent reflections on identity. Francophone post-structuralist thinkers, in particular, have contributed to modern thinking about identity through their reflections on "the subject" in language, pointing to the irreducible link between the constitution of subjectivity itself and language. Lacan's equation between the subject and the subject of speech (Lacan, 2000: 40) and Derrida's claim that the subject is "inscribed in language, [and, as a result,] is a function of language" (Derrida, 2000: 91) both elucidate the complexities of this subject-language relationship. Another tenet of post-structuralist thinking has been the idea that subjectivity only exists as an effect of social practices and cultural templates. Such is the sense of Althusser's claim that the subject is

an ideological effect since individuals become subjects only by virtue of their “interpellation” through ideology (Althusser, 1971). This development is also the direction of Foucault’s theory where social practices are responsible for creating specific social subjects (Foucault, 1984).

These ideas have been instrumental to identity studies as they have contributed to the move away from a notion of identity as the prerogative of a subject and a function of her/his beliefs and feelings to a conception of how subjectivity operates itself as a stable and coherent ensemble of characteristics defining groups or persons. Postmodern ideas about identity reject the notion of the “subject” as a unit encompassing rationality and freedom of choice (De Fina, 1999). They have led to the substitution of the single term “identity” with alternative formulations, such as plural “identities,” reflecting the notion that individuals and groups have access to a repertoire of choices socially available to them, or the term “identification,” referring to a construction and a process never completed that requires discursive work (Hall, 2000: 16). This turn has had important consequences for American and ethnic studies scholars which have turned to the investigation of ways in which fragmented identities coexist within the same individual; ways in which identities change and evolve according to situations, interlocutors and contexts; and ways in which identities are created, imposed or repressed through social institutions and interactions (Oboler, 1995; Rosaldo, 1989; Weber, 2001).

Building upon these perspectives, contemporary scholars addressing human mobility and identities have proposed concepts of hybrid, mobile and relational identities, defined as contingent and emerging and discursively constructed. They argue for the need to recognize the experience of migration as ambivalent and complex, that requires

considering both structural factors and human agency (Gabriel, 2004; Mason, 2004; De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg, 2006; Easthope, 2009).

Additionally, culture and ethnicity, two basic elements of the formation of identity as it has been defined, must be revisited in order to move away from the single identity perspective, towards the possibility of multiple identities and contradictory positions.

First, moving away from the idea of ethnicity attributed by birth, defined by culture as a set of cultural identities and passed down through the generations (Cohen, 1978), ethnicity is now redefined as both externally and internally constituted. It is socially constructed, mobile, flexible and "...finds a home in multiple localities, layers of expressions and degrees of scale in the world system" (Kozaitis, 2001). This constructivist approach to ethnicity emphasizes that ethnic groups exercise a collective resistance to and compliance with host institutions that reinforce an adaptive apparatus (Kozaitis, 1997) and that reproduces their organizational solidarity and identity (Kozaitis, 1997). Thus, referring to Latinos, I argue that ethnicity is not a set of customs that survived from the life in the home countries; it is a collective identity that emerges from the interaction with their own people, with other immigrants, and with the larger cultural world with which they debate and dialogue with, constantly reshaping their identity.

Second, following the same theoretical approach, culture is one of the most debated concepts across disciplines. For decades, it was considered the primary focus of anthropologists who sought to approach it as coherent wholes to be studied from a scientific perspective. Today, this notion has been rejected as such, even from the very core of the anthropological discipline. James Clifford, in his "Writing on culture" (1986), states that: "Cultures are not scientific objects.... cultures are produced historically and

are actively contested...it is not a unified corpus of symbols to be described...(it) is contested, temporal and emergent (18-19).” In this sense, the concept of culture has been reconceived, moving away from a static, uniform and coherent notion of culture to that of a place of social struggle, where particular forms of power produce opposition and contestation in the very act of trying to control it. Thus, cultural identities are the result of complex, cultural exchanges embedded in histories that extend beyond national borderlines and, consequently, must have a national focus as well as a transnational perspective (Ickstadt, 2002).

In my research, ethnicity, class, gender, immigration status, and occupation are the major structuring forces that shape women’s identity construction and performance as activists. Drawing from the assumption that most women migrate in search of better work conditions, a basic human rights issue, my central research questions are: What are the factors conducive to female immigrants’ collective mobilization for workers’ rights? More specifically, what are the structural factors in the host country (i.e. labor markets, civil society organizations and immigration policies) that contribute to the mobilization? What are the factors in the women’s life course, that is, life in the country of origin, migration and life in the host country, that account for mobilization?

To address these questions, I used the case study method as a research strategy as it responds best to my subject of inquiry. According to Yin (2009), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and in its real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear; the researcher has little or no control over the events and is generally suitable to study complex social phenomena (18). Furthermore, Flyubjerg (2011) adds that the

decision to use a case study is linked primarily to the choice of the individual unit of study and the setting of its boundaries. The choice of a case study implies the definition of what is to be studied. Flyubjerg argues that:

... case studies are *intensive* and comprise more detail, richness, completeness, and variance than other analytical approaches because they illustrate developments happening over time and because they focus on the relationship to the environment, which is otherwise known as context (301-302).

Other analytical approaches, such as experiments and surveys, do not prioritize the relationship of the phenomenon to be studied to its context.

My research topic fits the definition of a case study since identity formation is a long-term process that evolves throughout the life course. Latina immigrant workers' mobilization for rights is a contemporary phenomenon that has to be addressed in its real life context, namely the women's program and the women's everyday lives.

Understanding the women's experience through their life cycle implies documenting their perceptions of their rights as female workers as those understandings evolve through time, which requires attention to *detail, richness and completeness* in an effort to fully capture nuances connected to these experiences.

My case study is grounded in a support program for Latina immigrant domestic workers housed in *Casa de Maryland*, a non-governmental organization that tends to the Latino community in the Washington DC Metropolitan Area. The program has two main objectives: 1) to develop an alternative for the women's income earnings through a cooperative and 2) to advocate for the rights of domestic workers. The women that participate in the program formed a committee that, together with a *Casa* staff member, is in charge of planning and leading the program's activities. The committee is named *Comité de Mujeres Buscando Justicia* (Committee of Women Seeking Justice).

In tending to the needs of the women that arrived at *Casa*, the program evolved throughout the years from responding to the women's needs of seeking and finding work to concentrating in advocating for a legislation to protect domestic work in Montgomery County, Maryland. Different life experiences brought these women to the US, but a number of commonalities unite them: they were all poor and marginalized in their countries of origin, and they all migrated to the US searching for a better life, for employment that would allow them to fulfill their most basic needs and provide for families in the US and back home.

They arrive at *Casa* with hopes of fulfilling this purpose – either to find a job or access services that would help them better prepare them for the job market, such as English classes, computer skills, etc. The history of the women's group as documented here explores a change in the needs that the women bring to *Casa*'s meetings. In the process of establishing themselves in the new society, their demands shift from seeking to fulfill their individual needs (those related to their biography), those which brought them here, which are linked to their lives in their countries of origin, to working towards the collective well-being of the new social group they become part of as they settle in the US as Latina immigrant domestic workers.

In order to explore these experiences in depth, I selected a convenience sample within the group to understand how the women transition from looking after their individual needs to mobilizing for their rights as workers.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Ethnography, Identities and Narratives***

As described by contemporary scholarship, ethnography can be defined as a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, representing at least, in part, their own terms and, as a result, the irreducibility of human experience. It is an iterative-inductive research method that evolves in design throughout the course of the study, in the context of the agents' daily lives and cultures, watching what happens, listening to what is said and asking questions, all in search for meaning. The finished product is the production of a richly written account. Contemporary scholarship acknowledges that context and meaning, the traditional concerns of ethnography, are held in place by systems of power that must be considered in the (ethnographic) enterprise. It also acknowledges the interaction between the role of theory with that of the researcher's own role and views humans as part object and part subjects (Willis and Trondman, 2000; O' Reilly, 2005; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Hammersley, 1992; Agar, 1986).

My ethnographic approach is centered in giving voice to Latina immigrant women to understand the complexity of the immigration experience. Moving beyond the statistical portrait allows me to approach the main components of migration flows through the voice of the women, providing an insight to their everyday life issues and therefore enriching our understanding of human mobility and providing valuable information to policy makers, particularly at the local level, that can help improve migration outcomes both for immigrants themselves and for the host societies.

I am using a holistic approach to the women's lives that aims at understanding the women's life stories in the different contexts they take place, by analyzing their

narratives through the lenses of the cultural worlds they navigate as they move to different social environments and eventually to different nation-states.

Departing from my own experience as a Latina immigrant, I am using my relationship to shared cultural traditions, addressing differences and similarities in the way we experience them.

Though I am not writing myself in the final product, I acknowledge that throughout the ethnographic endeavor, meaning is constructed in my interaction with the participants through these shared cultural traditions, and it has influenced both my perceptions as well as that of the participants.

From an array of ethnographic methods, I used life history interviews and participant observation as they provided the adequate tools to collect data from my research participants in order to answer my research questions.

Life history is a qualitative research method for gathering information on the subjectivity of a person's life. Through life history interviews, researchers try to "...see things from the point or points of view of the person we are interviewing ... to know the other through oneself is an act of conceptual empathy and culturally inferred imagination" (Caughey, 2006). My process of introspection on my own experience with domestic service throughout my life, although not from the perspective of a domestic worker, but from that of an employer, has contributed to deepen my conceptual tools to interpret the women's narratives about their lives as workers.

Though traced back to sociological works in the 1920s, life history interviews as a method fits within the ethnographic approach to qualitative research. According to Heyl (2001), different types of interviews are carried out in different research contexts,

including unstructured and in-depth interviews, but there are certain premises that place interviews within the ethnographic perspective. Heyl defines those as:

The definition of ethnographic interviewing here will include those projects in which researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researchers the meaning they place on events in their worlds (369).

Heyl asserts that it is precisely the quality of the relationship established between interviewer and interviewee that characterizes the ethnographic endeavor as it empowers interviewees, allowing them to shape the research process.

In my fieldwork, while my long-term participant observation, volunteering to the committee, was conducive to the development of a trustful relationship between the participants and myself, my role as employer was what contextualized for them, my research participants, my activist work for the group. Also, the life history interview process implied building a close relationship between researcher and participants as they shared significant life events with me. I therefore allowed them to guide the research process. I asked a few general questions and some follow up questions, so they could choose what they wanted to talk about and bring their voice in to the narrative.

Considering further that the ethnographic interviewer's objective is to understand other people's worlds from their perspective, focusing on the meaning they assign to events and actions (Spradley, 1979), the context of an interview influences the production of meaning, not only in terms of the narrative but also in terms of concrete situations. Ethnographic fieldwork implies that interviews take place in the context of the interviewees' everyday lives (De Fina, 2003). Thus, interviews are conducted where the researcher goes into the interviewee's world (home, work, business, daily activities) in

order to capture the interviewee's world, rather than the interviewee going into the researcher's world.

Ethnographic interviewing is generally used as one method among others to compose ethnography of a group, which is defined as a cultural description that bridges two worlds, making sense of one world from the point of view of another one. It focuses on groups, communities or institutions, whose members share a belief system, a culture, and therefore, the objective is to look for similarities that allow the ethnographer to understand the shared elements of the group (Agar, 1996).

Shifting the ethnographic perspective from the idea of a shared culture to that of individuals carrying multiple cultures that are shared with different groups in everyday life demands that the research objective become that of "...construct[ing] a cultural portrait of a particular individual" (Caughey, 2006: 8).

Agar and Caughey use the concept of cultural traditions (among others<sup>4</sup>) to address how individuals negotiate identities in multicultural settings from an ethnographic perspective. Caughey defines this approach in the following way: "Like the concept of culture, ... cultural tradition points to a system of meaning that includes its own vocabulary and beliefs and its own set of roles for acting in the world" (2006: 14). It refers to the different social worlds an individual engages with in her/his everyday life. Traditions, adds Agar, are "a shorthand term for the resources available (to the individual) to make sense out of experience" (1986: 18).

Through life history interviews, an individual's cultural traditions are elicited. As people talk about their lives and construct a narrative in the interview process, they refer

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<sup>4</sup> See Linde, 1993; Shore, 1996; McCollum, 2002.

to the different worlds they navigate. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) add that research participants draw from different sets of knowledge to answer questions and refer to phrases they use that point to shifting frames of reference during an interview. These are key to different cultural traditions as the research participant positions herself/himself through her/his multiple cultural references and settings. Examples of cultural traditions range from more general commonalities (large ones), that is those which refer to belonging to a large group, such as nationality, to more specific ones such as ethnic/racial affiliation, gender, class, occupation, and religion, among others. Also, it is worth noting that the cultural traditions around which the narrative is built are often gendered (Caughey, 2006).

Working with life histories through the lens of cultural traditions is not a linear, easy-to-follow recipe. Cultural traditions are intertwined in everyday life, and the way the research participant relates to each of them is complex. Caughey offers an approach that represents the dominant, negotiated or oppositional ways of relating to a cultural tradition. As described above, the combination of different traditions may potentially expose the relationship of the research participant with her/his cultural traditions, illustrating how belief systems might be conflicting. Altogether, navigating through cultural traditions is an everyday life exercise. Investigating how the research participant solves conflicts and contradictions among her/his cultural traditions is also relevant to the life history process, providing an opportunity for participants to elicit the beliefs that allow them to navigate these different worlds.

Part of the ethnographic enterprise has always been self or autoethnography (Atkinson, 2006). It is argued that before the so called “reflexive turn” anthropologists

considered that the right way to do ethnography was to avoid introspection as it would only contaminate an understanding of another culture that existed objectively.

Retrospectively, researchers now acknowledge that even when the anthropologist does not state her/his influence in her/his ethnographic work, it has always been there. The ethnographer's identity and her/his subject matter have always been interrelated and, thus, are not necessarily products of postmodern predicaments (Atkinson, 2006; Caughey, 2006).

Presently, this relationship has been largely discussed. Departing from the idea that the ethnographer is an intrinsic part of her/his work, Atkinson (2006) asserts that:

...reflexivity in ethnography refers to the ineluctable fact that the ethnographer is thoroughly implicated in the phenomena that he or she documents, that there can be no disengaged observation of a social scene that exists in a 'state of nature' independent of the observer's presence, ... 'the ethnography' is a product of the interaction between the ethnographer and the social world and the ethnographer's interpretation of phenomena is always something that is crafted through an ethnographic imagination (402).

As most of the literature on ethnographic methods indicates, participant observation is the most distinctive method of ethnography. Though it has changed over time, it has, from the beginning of anthropological research, been used as an essential part of fieldwork. Considering that ethnographic research is the process of learning about people's lives, or particular aspects of their lives, from their own perspective and from the context of their lived experience, participant observation allows the researcher to participate in people's lives over lengthy periods of time, to ask questions about their activities, and to observe them as they move along their daily routines (O'Reilly, 2005; Agar, 1996; Emerson, 2001).

Although the basic practice of the method has not changed, the theoretical shift, described above, has changed the way researchers approach the field and relate to it, the

way they gather information and the way they process this information to write up an ethnography.

Agar, in his introductory chapter to the second edition of his classic book about ethnography, *The Professional Stranger*, offers a clear description of how the epistemological shift (the so-called “reflexive turn”<sup>5</sup>) in ethnography affected and changed the way participant observation is carried out. He reflects on his own approach to the method using the first edition of his book in 1980 and comparing that to the second edition of his book in 1996 that details his evolving approach to participant observation in response to the changes in the anthropological discipline. He asserts that participant observation was historically more about observation than about participating, responding to *encyclopedic knowledge* (author’s terminology) that the researcher gathered before entering the field. The researcher was a scientist, and the “field” was her/his laboratory. Observation offered ideas to be tested through other methods of ethnography.

Now, however, participation is often emphasized over observation, and the experience of participating leads to a storytelling format often called a narrative ethnography.<sup>6</sup> The encyclopedic knowledge is subordinate to the data gathered through participant observation. The objective of ethnography, then, shifts from grasping culture as shared knowledge to the practices of everyday life and the way they are built out of shared knowledge (Agar 1996: 9). Further, Agar argues that the previous gaze/approach to

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<sup>5</sup> This term is often used to refer to the shift from a more positivist approach to doing ethnography to a more post-modern perspective that calls for questioning the idea of an objective reality in the social sciences that can be grasped through the right methodology, described in the first part of this chapter. The term reflexive refers specifically to the idea that reality and representation are related reflexively, each shaping each other (O’Reilly, 2005; Emerson, 2001; Heyl, 2001; Agar 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Examples are, among others, Behar, 1994 and Kondo, 1990.

participant observation carried the resonance of commonalities, patterns and themes; whereas, recent/narrative ethnography<sup>7</sup> searches for the complexities, the differences and variations, so that by eliciting them in the narratives, they can explain them (1996: 10-12).

Another aspect of participant observation that has changed is the relationship between the researcher and the group of people she/he is studying. In the past, the researcher considered herself/himself a scientist observing an objective reality that she/he could carefully, through a set of methods, grasp and represent. It followed that she/he was to stay “detached” from the group, keeping a professional distance that allowed for objective observations. Once the idea of an objective reality came under scrutiny, however, ethnographers felt more comfortable establishing a close relationship to the people who participate in their studies as well as participating more actively in their everyday lives, so they could experience these events and learn what they mean to the researched (Emerson, 2001).

While the life histories of the women integrating into the group allowed me to understand their individual experiences as immigrants and workers and to compare them, eliciting differences and similarities, the ethnographic account of the group through participant observation stressed commonalities, looking at the women as members of a group with common backgrounds and objectives and focusing on the development of the group’s objectives.

Participating in the group as a volunteer allowed me to generate data through registering the dialogues that took place among them, when they were not talking directly

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<sup>7</sup> Similar to the “reflexive turn,” the term “narrative turn” also refers to the shift from positivist ethnography to postmodern and constructivist ethnography, specifically concerning the analytical aspect. Narratives become the object of analysis and a research tool.

to me, the topics that were elicited during their discussions, their concerns and complaints about their work and about domestic work in general, and their ideas about the committee's agenda and how it was handled by other participants and the leader.

From 2002 to 2008, I carried out participant observation, attending the committee's weekly working meetings, lobbying sessions, events and festivities, volunteering for the group as a translator and performing different supportive tasks as I was asked.

Through participant observation, I registered the way these women related to each other and to the leader in the committee's meetings, the way they referred to each other, the way they expressed their experiences about work, both as workers in the US and back home, the interplay of the differing roles they each performed at the meetings and the way they negotiated the structures within the group. By participating in the group's activities, I grasped the way they experienced the group.

At the same time, I paid close attention to the way my presence as an outsider from a different social context impacted the group dynamic. I paid specific attention to our interactions and to the group's reactions to my participation, through comments and input to the discussions. I noted how our interaction contributed to how the women constructed their comments, opinions and descriptions of the issues addressed in the meetings and events, either by being critical or oppositional to my comments, or by supporting them or by making efforts to differentiate themselves from the rest of the group.

Participant observation both during festivities, work and lobbying sessions with the county council members also allowed me to learn about the women's present work life, issues faced and responses to those issues. I also was able to observe and learn the way in

which they interact, agree and disagree on issues related to their advocacy work and other related projects. In so doing, I was able to document the strategies the women resorted to when negotiating individual identities within the group. While constantly seeking approval from the leader, who they all respected, some resorted to referring to their prior experiences as activists, and others emphasized the constant struggles with their employers as a central theme for domestic workers.

Using informal interviews carried out during this period and the attendance records of the committee's members, I selected five participants on the basis of the following characteristics: that they had been in the group from the beginning, that they were active members and that they attended most of the meetings and events. I carried out life history interviews with the five participants between 2007 and 2010.

I conducted life history interviews to elicit Latinas' narratives to understand their experiences, from the time they were in their countries of origin, to becoming aware of the process of displacement and to becoming aware of the adjustments they needed to make to accommodate their lifestyles to the country of residence. The life stories allowed me to locate the different cultural traditions (as categories of identities) the women navigate and the changing interrelationship between those traditions and their present day perspectives as immigrants living in the US.

### ***Analysis and Interpretation***

Narratives are the point of intersection between the expression of individual feelings and representations and the reflection upon and construction of societal processes, ideologies and roles. Analyzing narratives, we get to individual experiences and to how

these individuals understand collective social representation and ideologies.

Consequently, life history narratives are an important way to study/address the construction of identity.

To understand the way the participants construct themselves and others, I focused on the way in which the women composed a self-presentation through narrating their life experiences. Although this focus might seem personal or psychological, as described and defined in my analysis above, it is also highly cultural. Identity terms used to describe self and others are always negotiated according to the concrete context where interaction takes place in the narratives, and they hold complex relationships to other terms available within a specific cultural setting (Caughey, 2006; De Fina, 2003).

Narrative analysis entails looking at the way narrators represent themselves as protagonists in storytelling in terms of agency and social orientation and at the relationship that narrators create between identities, actions and reactions in different stories. Identities are captured in concrete and specific interactional occasions as the story weaves multiple identities. These multi-faceted representations and descriptions of self, elicited in a narrative, are not random. They are linked to the concepts of the several cultural traditions the narrator (participant) navigates in her/his daily life (Caughey, 2006; De Fina, 2003). Some examples of cultural traditions that came up in the interviews are related to motherhood, household responsibilities, being a wife, religious practices, political activism, and community work, among others.

Lastly, self-perception is also linked to dimensions of difference that must be considered in the analysis. Categories of difference are culture-specific and informed by relations of power. In the US, the meaning of categories such as race, ethnicity, gender

and class vary among different groups. Immigrants, in crossing boundaries between national societies, have to negotiate the categorical system that defines them pre-migration with that prevailing in the US in order to establish a sense of self. These changing perceptions of self and other are articulated in the narration of their life stories, which become a locus to study the construction of identities among immigrants as they strive to settle in the US, while often still connected on a daily basis to their country of origin.

Locating cultural traditions related to work along the research participant life cycle, I identified the main categorical systems present in their lives when representing themselves in both countries. Using software for qualitative research,<sup>8</sup> I developed codes for the cultural traditions related to work, differentiating among the three life periods.

Atlas ti is a qualitative analysis tool to help systematically analyze complex phenomena in text and multimedia data. The program provides tools to locate, code, and annotate findings in primary data material and to produce reports according to the coding system established by the researcher as well as to visualize complex relations between them through establishing causal connections between codes.

For each research participant, I created a file with the transcribed interviews. I then coded each interview following a code list created from the themes elicited through each interview. I also established relationships between the codes within each of the three life course stages – life in the country of origin, migration and life in the country of residence. I created reports for each participant based on the codes and the life course stage, which allowed me to organize the data chronologically.

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<sup>8</sup> I used Atlas ti, a software for qualitative research for creating a coding system, coding transcribed interviews, videos and recordings and producing reports for each code.

Finally, based on the reports, I created a social matrix of themes within each participant's life story and a matrix of themes common to the life stories of the five women, which I used to interpret the data and elicit the factors in their life course that account for their mobilization for their rights as workers and active transformers of the labor market.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Case Study: The History of the Committee of Women Seeking Justice**

#### ***Background: The History of Casa of Maryland***

*Casa* is a non-government organization dedicated to tending to the needs of the immigrant community in Maryland. It is the setting for the women's program that evolved over the years into the Committee of Women Seeking Justice. The development of the women's program is directly linked to that of the organization itself. It started out as part of an employment program in 1991 when *Casa* organized the first such program geared mainly to immigrant men; it then evolved into the Committee of Women Seeking Justice in 2006 as the organization consolidated its advocacy efforts. Thus, it is important to first understand how the organization evolved over its 25 years of service to the Latino community to then focus on the women's program and on the women themselves.

*Casa* is an organization addressing the needs of the Latino community in the Washington DC Metropolitan area. It is located in Montgomery County, MD, a large suburban county that borders Washington, DC, and one of the highest income per capita counties in the country. However, clients also come from neighboring Prince Georges County and even from the District of Columbia.

Founded in 1985, *Casa* is a community-based, non-profit organization that was started when local religious congregations, refugees, and community members sought to assist Central Americans fleeing war and civil turmoil in their countries of origin.

Initially, *Casa* provided emergency clothing, food, immigration assistance, and English instruction to new immigrant arrivals. *Casa* started with 2 staff members, a handful of volunteer teachers and funding from various religious congregations.

As Latinos grew in numbers in Montgomery County and Prince George's County, Maryland, and its needs became more complex, *Casa's* programs expanded in response to the community's changing profile. In 1991, as a growing number of day laborers began congregating on street corners looking for work in the area of Silver Spring, Montgomery County, MD, *Casa*, with the support of Montgomery College and private foundations, set up a temporary trailer to provide legal and employment assistance to the workers. In 1993, Montgomery County granted *Casa* space and funding to operate a formal *Center for Employment and Training* in Silver Spring, MD, which has served as a model for the creation of numerous other centers in Maryland and across the country.<sup>9</sup>

The first mission statement of the organization guided *Casa's* strategies and objectives up until after September 11 (9/11), when anti immigrant sentiments and policies spiked, and in response, the organization took a turn to focus on advocacy efforts. This first mission reads as follows:

El Centro's<sup>10</sup> mission is to improve the quality of life and social and economic well being of the Latino community in Maryland. El Centro facilitates the self-development, organization, and mobilization of the Latino community to achieve full participation in the larger society. El Centro achieves its goals through programs in areas such as education, housing, employment, health, economic development, and legal assistance and services (Mission Statement: El Centro, Inc., Annual Report, 1997-98).

*Casa* currently employs over 60 professional staff in seven locations that range from *The Mansion*, a 21,000 square feet Multicultural Center that houses *Casa's* offices and offers multiple services, to locations for primarily employment programs. Locations are

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<sup>9</sup> Current sites of the organization include: The Multicultural Center, Silver Spring Welcome Center, Wheaton Welcome Center, Casa Community Center at Piney Ridge, Baltimore Welcome Center, Shady Grove Welcome Center and Prince George's Welcome Center.

<sup>10</sup> Initially, the name of the organization was *Central American Solidarity and Assistance of Maryland, inc.* and was informally referred to as *El Centro* by staff and clients until it changed to *Casa of Maryland, inc.*, and expanded its target population to include Latino immigrants from all of Latin America (*Casa's* annual report, 2004 – 2005).

mainly in the neighborhoods of Langley Park, Takoma Park, Silver Spring, and Germantown, and since 2002, also include an expansion to Baltimore, Maryland. *Casa* caters its programs to three main constituencies: low-income women, workers, and tenants.

Program offerings include employment and training, legal services, English language/adult education, computer and job skills development, health promotion/HIV-AIDS prevention, citizenship preparation, housing counseling and immigration and social services. These projects are designed to help new and struggling immigrants stabilize their lives in their new environments and gain the skills and knowledge necessary to improve their current situations.<sup>11</sup>

During the past decade, as immigrants moved into the Metropolitan region, anti-immigrant sentiments increased at the local and national level and gave way to local and national anti-immigrant policies that have dominated this social landscape for the past few years. Across the US, health and education services to undocumented immigrants have become increasingly limited, access to obtaining drivers' licenses have been increasingly denied, and raids and deportation have grown in scope over the past decade. In response, *Casa* evolved from a service-centered organization to an advocacy-centered organization, particularly at the county and state level. Service provision is thus placed within the context of advocacy for Latino rights, and this shift is clearly embodied in its current mission statement:

*Casa's* mission is to improve the quality of life and fight for equal treatment and full access to resources and opportunities for low-income Latino immigrants and their

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<sup>11</sup> For the current organizational staff see <<http://www.casademaryland.org/about-mainmenu-26/staff-mainmenu-97>>.

families. *Casa* facilitates the self-development, organization, and mobilization of the Latino community to achieve full participation in the larger society. *Casa* achieves its goals through a combination of programs that focus on economic empowerment, financial independence and political integration. It is committed to help the community find jobs that pay decent wages, improve health outcomes and organize the community to create greater political power, among others. (*Casa of Maryland's* Annual Report, 2010).

In addition to the services offered, *Casa de Maryland* lobbies the Maryland state legislature regarding immigrant-related issues, such as advocating for the Dream Act, which allows young adults who entered the US as undocumented aliens when very young to have access to the state university system at in-state tuition rates, or opposing restrictions on drivers' licenses for undocumented migrants, arguing that restricting licenses will only mean more unlicensed and uninsured motorists will be driving on the road. As each issue arises, *Casa de Maryland* builds coalitions with other immigrant rights groups in the Washington DC Metropolitan area, busing immigrants to committee hearings in Annapolis, for instance, or organizing rallies. *Casa* also maintains fairly robust ties with the transnational hometown associations in the Washington DC Metropolitan area, most of them from Central American countries.

### ***The Women's Program:***

#### **First Stage 1994 - 2005: The Employment Matchmaker**

The Women's Program started at the Center for Employment and Training office, which opened in 1991 in a small trailer behind a Seven-Eleven convenience store in Prince Georges County. At that time, job seekers were primarily men who dealt directly with employers who came in trucks to pick them up for a day's work. When residents complained about the large number of immigrants hanging out in public areas looking for work, the county helped *Casa* get a house a few blocks away, and since then, *Casa* has

brokered most job negotiations, through their growing number of employment centers throughout Maryland, thus curtailing job exploitation. Some face-to-face job arrangements have continued to be made at the Seven-Eleven but to a lesser extent than in the past and not under Casa's supervision. With this transition, *Casa* then functioned as an employment agency akin to a job matchmaker. Workers were required to have *Casa's* identification cards before the organization's services were used, which entailed attending an orientation meeting and having one's picture taken for the card.

Among the men that gathered every day in search of work, a few Latina immigrants started showing up. The men often harassed them, so *Casa* decided to tend to their needs in a private space. The first stages of a women's program began around 1994 when an employee of the county began meeting informally with the Latina women of the community on a volunteer basis. These gatherings evolved into *Mujeres de Hoy* (Women of Today), a support and empowerment group that convened monthly for educational and training purposes.<sup>12</sup> The underlying mission of this effort was the empowerment and economic development of the local Latina population, specifically the creation of a women's cooperative to help each other find employment. However, the undertaking was too time-consuming for the volunteers and contributing staff members to maintain or develop. They realized the program demanded a full-time staff person dedicated solely to program development.

In August 1995, *Casa* hired the first staff person to work with the women. However, the full-time position was split between the Women's Employment Program and the Education and Training Program. The administration believed they could not hire anyone

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<sup>12</sup> *Mujeres de Hoy* translated means "Women of Today."

to work full-time with women without first tending to the training and education needs of the larger Latino community. In other words, *Casa* did not prioritize tending to the specific needs of Latinas over providing basic services for the whole community of Latinos. In addition, the organization privileged other program initiatives, including housing and AIDS prevention.

The staff worker concentrated on meeting immediate needs and finding jobs for the women and, due to time constraints, neglected the support of group and economic development initiatives. When the county employee's contract ended in July 2006, *Casa* did not hire a replacement for the women's program, either on a part-time or full-time basis. During this period, other *Casa* staff and volunteers maintained the women's sector of the Employment and Training Center in a skeletal state, even when the number of women attending the bi-weekly meetings kept increasing.

Since the year 2000, as a graduate student, I have been working with Latino immigration in Montgomery County, Maryland, under the guidance of Dr. Judith Freidenberg, my advisor. In 2002, I started research for my doctoral studies and joined Dr. Freidenberg's ongoing research on Latino immigrants in Langley Park, Maryland, a neighborhood spanning two Counties, one of which borders the University of Maryland College Park campus. At the time, Freidenberg was leading a participatory assessment of the women's program at *Casa* in response to a request from the organization with the objective of understanding the women's needs in order to consider improving program planning. As her research assistant, I started attending the meetings and carrying out participant observation. I was introduced to the staff in charge of the Women's Employment Program and offered volunteer work while carrying out research, first as

part of Dr. Freidenberg's team and then for my own dissertation research. In these various roles, I have carried out research from 2002 to 2008.

While carrying out research for Dr Freidenberg, attending the meetings, interviewing staff members and reviewing program records, as well as establishing *rapport* with the participants, I was intrigued by the women's lives beyond the meetings. What did they leave behind? Why did they come to Maryland? What was their everyday life like in this new environment? Their presence at the meetings spoke to the central role of work in their lives, and I started thinking of focusing my research on addressing the central role that work played in these women's lives. As low-income Latinas, I knew from my experience living in Latin American countries, that their lives back home were organized around work – be it paid or unpaid. At the same time, listening to their voices at the meetings, I realized that work was mostly the reason they migrated and their livelihoods and often that of family members back home, depended on it. Thus, for these women, work seemed to be the most significant cultural tradition – the type of job they performed, the conditions they worked under, and the income they generated are directly related to the life they led. As a result, some consequences were having more time for themselves, family and leisure as well as providing for family back home and being economically independent.

Dr. Freidenberg's research project objective was to understand how the program addressed the needs of the women who attended from the perspective of the women themselves. Methods of data collection included participant observation, employment records review, and client interviews.

From 1994 to 2005, the Employment Program functioned primarily as an employment matchmaker. As a result, my participant observation consisted of social interactions taking place during one-hour long biweekly morning meetings that included sitting at a large table with the women and the staff from Casa while the job announcements took place. I participated in matching jobs to applicants (calling employers, arranging for interviews, providing applicants information on transportation, translating, etc.). Participant observation over several months of job announcement meetings showed that women ranged in age from 15 to 70 (visual estimate). As the women spoke and introduced themselves, we could ascertain that virtually all the women were Latina, mostly from El Salvador and Guatemala, with the exception of one African woman. All Latinas spoke Spanish except for two Brazilians who spoke Portuguese. A few came with infants.

The majority of jobs announced at *Casa* were for unskilled labor. The distribution of 54 jobs over a two-month period was as follows: 17 cleaning (homes, office, or restaurant), 4 sales, 13 childcare, 1 translation, 1 teaching, 3 elder care, 5 clerical, 5 food preparation, 2 embroidery, and 3 laundry. Most of the positions required little or no English, paid at least minimum wage salaries (\$5.75 to \$8 an hour), and though some became permanent positions, they were usually listed as short-term, sometimes lasting only a few hours.

The central finding of the participant observation stage of the research was that, over time, advertised jobs remained unfilled. This finding prompted the examination of employment program past records to evaluate the supply-demand interface of the job market opportunities available to these women. Data from employment program records

was gathered through the analysis of client sign-in sheets and employer request forms. Fifty-four jobs were offered over a two-month period. Therefore, there were roughly 3 women for each job opening. Yet, by the end of this period, clients of *Casa* had filled only 37 % of these positions. Some jobs that were announced regularly did not fit the women's qualifications; for example, some positions required drivers' licenses, which most women did not have often due to their undocumented status.<sup>13</sup> Then too, some jobs that did fit their skill levels did not work out. Differences with employers about minor issues, transportation barriers or the women's perception that there was "not enough" pay accounted for most of the mismatches.

The central finding from an analysis of the employment records was that there was a revolving door pattern in the job matching process; many applicants either did not survive the hiring interview or worked temporarily, and about a third of women returned for the next meeting, providing evidence, in and of itself, of an unsuccessful match. To understand the *real* availability of jobs, we focused on understanding the dynamics of the job supply and demand from the perspective of the women.

The testimonial information provided by 15 Latina women who attended the program addressed their employment trajectories, their work expectations, their reasons for accessing *Casa* and their opinions with respect to the extent to which the program enhanced their access to employment.

The women reported several barriers to accessing employment (English skills, transportation, lack of documentation, among others). However, analysis of the

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<sup>13</sup> Back then, although they could get a drivers' license in the state of Maryland, most of them feared their undocumented status would be discovered by government authorities if they applied for one. Currently, since 2009, undocumented migrants have no access to a drivers' license in the state.

ethnographic interviews evidenced the contradiction between the women's reported willingness to perform any job and their actual decision to take a job. These findings were grouped into four themes.

The first theme was the *willingness to take any job*. Regardless of their skill level, the women reported that they were virtually indiscriminate in their employment decisions and willing to do “*lo que sea*” (anything). Work provided for the fulfillment of material needs, and many women had migrated for this very reason: “Work is necessary since if I do not work, I do not eat”, they reasoned. In addition to providing for themselves and their families residing in the US, work pay was used for remittances; over half of the women interviewed (53%) sent money to their home countries. Naomi claimed that six children in El Salvador depended on her for food, clothing, and shelter.

The second theme was *the multifaceted meaning of work*. Even if the fulfillment of material needs was primary, the majority of women discussed a dual nature to their work, identifying non-tangible benefits of employment with the material ones. To Panchita, “Work is everything.” Roxana explained that, “Work is necessary for the money, to defend yourself, and it makes you peaceful”. Issues of work were closely linked to identity, in both the discovery and assertion of self. Rosa credited work with helping her to recognize and realize her identity and, consequently, believed it was important to find satisfying work. In addition to income, work provided transcendent, “spiritual” benefits: “Spiritual because we need to perform our work with love and responsibility, and that comes from our inner self. Above all, [we] give lots of love”, she said. Most women reported on the positive effects of work in their personal lives; work contributed to good physical and mental health. Numerous women reportedly enjoyed work as physical

exercise; Luna explained that work is important to “keep spirits up.” Naomi described feeling anxious and sad while unemployed; Simona experienced boredom and restlessness. The women explained that job responsibility affirmed their personal worth and allowed for independence.

The third theme was *evaluating whether they will take the jobs*, depending on their wants in addition to their needs. The descriptions of ideal jobs varied greatly among the women as many described jobs that were congruent with their skill level. Those with low levels of training typically described domestic work positions with good pay or factory work with good benefits. Women with children expressed interest in working from their homes because of the flexible hours and freedom to tend to children at the same time. Women with professional training described positions within their fields: teaching poetry and writing, fashion design, and nursing. Some women reported wanting to continue their education, at the college level or in a certain trade, such as interior design and cosmetology. The multi-faceted meaning of work in the lives of women contributed to our understanding of the reasons why, as *Casa* staff asserted, they were not content with “anything” as regularly reported. Work did more than feed the children in Takoma Park or El Salvador; it affirmed self-worth and provided a sense of identity. In fact, work seemed to be central in the construction of identity as well as contributing to job insecurity in the context of the real scarcity of available jobs and perceived barriers.

The fourth theme was *job permanence*. Although the women’s discussion on previously held jobs illustrated the severity of job insecurity, some women reported leaving their jobs of their own accord to return to their home countries because the jobs were not mentally stimulating or because the pay was unsatisfactory. The informants

returned to their countries of origin either to visit family or retrieve their children. Upon return to the United States, the women started the job hunt and struggle for stability anew. Women also left jobs that did not meet their pay standards. As previously noted, the women reported that employers had become increasingly stingy and demanding in recent years. This too was a reason to quit after securing a job.

These women felt a sense of hopelessness and lack of control in their lives due to the constraints experienced in obtaining and keeping a job. Even when obstacles to gainful employment were surmounted, nothing ensured dependable, satisfying work. The barriers to employment applied not only to securing an individual job but also to job permanence, and these constraints needed to be understood within transnational space. To the extent that a transnational migrant is unable to provide for a network of members left in her home country, she might perceive migration to the United States as a negative experience. Through my participant observation and ethnographic interviews with these women, I found that their overall perception was that unemployment and sub-employment severely conspired against their ability to maintain ties to the country of origin in a manner that did not culturally violate expectations of their network members left in these home countries.

Considering that work and better income allows these women to provide for families back home and that these are the main reasons why they left their communities and families behind in the first place, the emotional cost involved, their negative perceptions, might be rendered purposeless or secondary to their primary concerns. Finally, beyond the constraints the women face to find secure employment that matched their needs, the patterns of employment of the women interviewed showed that they learned that the job

market in the US offers many options. As they described how they moved from one job to another, it became clear that though they might be unemployed for periods in between jobs, they do find another job, through employment programs or through social networks they develop, and often establish a pattern of “job hoping” in the search for the one that meets a greater number of their needs.

Although this research allowed Freidenberg and I to further our understanding of immigrant women’s interface with the job market through their experience in *Casa*’s employment program (Freidenberg and Bebianno Simões, 2006) the outcomes opened up complexities and research questions that the scope of the initial project had not included.

I decided to explore these research questions, particularly the interface of immigrant women with the job market and the focus on how the labor structure and the women’s work simultaneously linked country of origin with that of destination. I assumed that this link created a transnational social space where the women’s identities were constructed. I reasoned that to further the understanding of this process, I needed to understand the relationship of women to work through their interaction with both the formal and informal labor structure understood in a social context, thus predicated upon different social rules. I also assumed that identities emerged in how structural and social contexts affected their daily lives. As part of this process, I needed to address the role of social networks and immigrant organizations in developing awareness of the job market’s constraints and opportunities as well as of workers’ rights in the country of residence.

Towards the end of 2005, given the very poor outcomes of the employment program, *Casa* finally decided to cancel the meetings and post the job offers twice a week so the

women could check and contact the employers themselves. *Casa* still provided support to the women if required, but there was no assistance in the matching process.

### **Second Stage 2006 to 2010: The Committee of Women Seeking Justice**

By 2006, the organization decided to build upon the old *Mujeres de Hoy* program, geared towards "...building leadership and power among low-income Latinas in the Montgomery County area,"<sup>14</sup> in the context of the organization's move towards emphasizing advocacy and framing service provision within the fight for Latinos' human rights. It started searching for a full-time staff member to lead the group, and finally in July 2006, *Casa* hired a full-time employee for the refurbished women's program.

In 2006, when I went back to *Casa* to volunteer for the women's program again, I was interested in following up on the research that I had developed with Dr. Freidenberg and to explore the possibility of focusing my dissertation research on the program, addressing the questions that were left unanswered. I wanted to further explore the ways in which the women's experiences as workers in the country of origin and in the new country of residence, considering the different social practices (access to exercising rights, job availability, etc), inform their identity construction and how this process affects women's decisions in their daily lives with regards to work. As part of this process, I needed to address the role of social networks and immigrant organizations in developing awareness of the job market's constraints and opportunities as well as of workers' rights in the country of residence.

In the meantime, as mentioned above, *Casa* decided to search for better ways of helping the women in the area and started another group that derived from the

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<sup>14</sup> *Casa of Maryland*, inc. Annual Report 2004 — 2005.

employment program. This time, *Casa's* staff decided to listen to the women and gear the direction of the new group towards their interests. Among the women that often attended the group's meetings, a number of them reported an interest in working towards creating a cooperative as a means to earn an income for participants and to advocate for domestic workers' rights. A new staff member was hired to develop and work with this group, which basically catered to domestic workers. ADS led the program from mid - 2006 to mid - 2009. During this time, the women formed the *Committee of Women Seeking Justice*, with the objective of empowering Latina immigrant women through fostering economic development and advocating for their workers' rights.

I started attending the meetings again in September 2006. The new staff member in charge, A.S., had been working in the group for a few months and estimated the members were ready to start training to build a cooperative. The group named itself the *Committee of Women Seeking Justice*, which clearly spoke to the new direction the program was taking, bringing to the forefront the advocacy work. At this point, the group consisted of around 15 women, mostly Latinas, with the exception of a woman from India.

Nationalities combined women mostly from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia and Peru.

More specifically, the objectives of the group were first to advocate for domestic workers' rights, second to protect the women from exploitive employers and third to develop an alternative source of income for those who leave their jobs or wish to do so. As a result, the group's work was three-fold. First, they were being trained in the process of forming a cooperative while building consensus to define the project. Second, they were recruiting women (particularly domestic workers) to join the group. Third, they

were lobbying for legislation to regulate domestic work in Montgomery County, Maryland.

The differences between the new program and the prior one was striking. As I joined the meetings again, I was surprised to find a much smaller number of participants (15 on average as compared to 40-50 on average in the employment program), an active and engaged staff member, and for the first time a structured agenda to guide each working session of the group.

The changes both in the form and content of the meetings and the program led me to devise a new set of research questions. Although the number of women attending one given meeting was much smaller, they were very engaged and participative. I questioned how this drastic change took place?

It became clear that, in part, the program was moving in the same direction as the rest of *Casa's* organization, giving priority to and fostering advocacy work at all levels. Nonetheless, understanding the women's active engagement in this new endeavor required further research.

What had led these women to include mobilization for their workers' rights in the groups' objectives? Also, at this point, they were combining their mobilization efforts with developing an alternate source of income. I was interested in understanding the variables that became involved in this process of acknowledging their rights as workers and seizing the opportunity to fight for them.

Though for a couple of months during the Fall of 2006 (in the beginning), the group met to discuss the cooperative project and even started training sessions, this idea dissolved very quickly giving way to their concentrated efforts for drafting legislation to

protect domestic workers' rights and building alliances to support a bill. Starting in December 2006, the group was almost solely dedicated to advocating for legislation to protect domestic workers' rights. Although clients at *Casa* come from different parts of the Washington DC Metropolitan area, politically the group had to choose one jurisdiction to present and lobby for the legislation. Since Montgomery County is where *Casa* sits and since it has been supportive of the organization's causes, this jurisdiction was the most viable local to take up the domestic workers' plight.

From September 2006 to July 2008, when legislation was approved by the county's council, I attended approximately 25 of the 30 meetings the group held. Attendance to meetings varied and mostly ranged around 15 women. Among them, there was an assiduous group that consisted of 5 to 6 women that were present at most meetings. The group elected a President and Vice President to serve for yearly periods.

The bill that was eventually approved ensures that domestic workers in the County receive the legal protections they are entitled to under State law, as well as the right to a written employment contract governing the terms and conditions of employment. The law requires employers to negotiate with the domestic worker over the terms and conditions of employment and offer to sign a written contract specifying those terms and conditions of employment. An employer of a domestic worker must obtain either a written employment contract signed by both the employer and the domestic worker or a disclosure statement signed by the domestic worker. If the domestic worker is employed by an agency, the employment contract must be between the agency and the worker.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Extracted from a summary of the bill prepared by the Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection  
<[http://www.4nannytaxes.com/forms/Montgomery\\_County\\_MD\\_Domestic\\_Workers\\_FAQ.pdf](http://www.4nannytaxes.com/forms/Montgomery_County_MD_Domestic_Workers_FAQ.pdf)>.

During these years (2006-2008), the number of participants increased considerably and became very diverse. Women from African and South Asian countries joined the group, in part as an outcome of the group's making their work more visible and in part due to the increasing presence of immigrants from African countries in the Langley Park area.<sup>16</sup> By the time the bill was signed into law, participants in the committee numbered approximately 30 women. Nonetheless, the core of women present at almost every meeting did not change.

Analysis of participant observation throughout this period allowed me to understand how the group evolved into the committee and how it worked and strategized to fulfill their objectives, under the guidance of *Casa* and the newly hired staff. First, let us look at the evolution of the group from the perspective of the participants and from that of the organization.

From the women's perspective, as *Casa* became a place where immigrant Latina women could go to seek employment, to benefit from services or to obtain an identification card, the group provided them a space to meet other women who they could communicate and network with as well as share similar struggles/issues.

H.S.,<sup>17</sup> president of the committee for the first period, expressed in a meeting that since she had been volunteering and involved at *Casa* for more than 7 years, she could describe and relate domestic work experiences with the other women including her own related employment as a domestic worker. Describing the experience shared by women

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For the full text of the law see

<<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/ocp/domestic/pdfs/Law.pdf>>.

<sup>16</sup> See MPI Migration Information Source, 2008, at

<<http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=680>>.

<sup>17</sup> To insure privacy, I am using the initials of the names of the research participants.

who attended *Casa* throughout the years, H.S. referred to their work conditions in a meeting with a council member:

*We are very isolated; the work is very hard, often seven days a week and always 'on call' with no schedule, no days off and sometimes not even access to a telephone. I came to Casa and met many women who were suffering like me. I realized that if the women got together and organized, we could do something. Casa has given us the support we need to fight for our rights.*<sup>18</sup>

Sharing their struggles and searching for ways to fight for their rights and help others, H.S. said they decided to spread the word among their peers in the area and started organizing, supported by *Casa*, to fight for legislation that would address the special conditions of domestic work.

From the organization's perspective, *Casa's* experience working with low-income Latina immigrant women has also allowed the staff to develop a thorough understanding of the women's experiences as immigrants to this region. While operating the employment program for women, the organization gathered information about the women's skills and needs on one hand and about the labor market demand on the other. The efforts to match them with jobs offered elicited the barriers the women faced and the complexity of this intersection. More importantly, these years provided an insight in the everyday lives of domestic workers' struggles in the area and the constant violation of their rights as workers. Listening to the women, the organization supported the formation of the committee, and together with its members drew a strategy for improving domestic employees' working conditions.

The committee offered a space for domestic workers to seek support, share stories, and strategize for change. According to the staff person in charge of the program, *Casa*

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<sup>18</sup> Participant observations notes – group's meeting.

works closely with the women in an effort to bring awareness of the violation of their rights and of the opportunity to fight for better conditions. Talking about the work in the committee, A.S. asserts: "The first step for action is to get domestic workers to be angry about the conditions they have to endure; second is to help them support one another; and third is to get them going on the legislative campaigns knowing that the work they do is important and necessary."

Second, the group's way of working and strategizing consisted of recruiting domestic workers to join them, seeking support from other nongovernmental organizations and from the county's residents and lobbying with council members to obtain their support so they could introduce the bill to the council agenda.

The first step was to prevail upon Montgomery County to commission a survey of nearly 300 local domestic workers. The Montgomery County Health and Human Services Committee contacted a George Washington University research team to carry out the project. The goal of the study was to move beyond anecdotal evidence and provide the county's committee with sound empirical data on domestic working conditions in the county to inform discussions and possible policy solutions. Findings from the study showed that domestic workers are uniformly deprived of health benefits and retirement provisions as well as standard breaks and holidays. Moreover, the study also showed that almost 60% of domestic workers were expected to be constantly on call to serve the needs of their employers' families, regardless of the needs of their own families, while 80% were regularly deprived of overtime pay.<sup>19</sup> Significant wage differences and working conditions were found to prevail between live-in and live-out domestic workers,

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<sup>19</sup> For the complete survey, see [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/council.pdf.agenda/cm/2006/](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/council.pdf.agenda/cm/2006/).

with the former showing considerable disadvantages. While 13% of live-outs reported earnings below minimum wage, among live-ins the percentage reached 51% of those surveyed.<sup>20</sup>

Data from the study provided the rationale for drawing up a first draft of the bill of rights for domestic workers and seeking support among other non-government organizations in the area, the county's council members and Montgomery County residents as well as outreaching to other domestic workers in the county to seek their support and their participation in the committee.

To promote and lobby for the bill, meetings of the group evolved around four main activities. The first was to recruit support from other organizations in the Washington DC Metropolitan region. The outcome of this effort was a coalition of 31 faith-based, labor, refugee, community, and civil rights groups, including the Archdiocese of Washington, the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Muslim Community Center, the Metro DC Labor Council of the AFL-CIO,<sup>21</sup> and the Asian Pacific American Legal Resource Center, that joined *Casa* and the committee to rally for a domestic workers bill of rights.

The second consisted of the women organizing outreach strategies to obtain support among County residents. Working with the organizations that form the coalition, the committee managed to gather over 4000 signed petitions, which were instrumental to search for a sponsor among council members.

The third activity consisted of meetings with the Montgomery County council members. The committee approached the county's council members to lobby for support

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<sup>20</sup> For the complete survey, see [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/council.pdf.agenda/cm/2006/](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/council.pdf.agenda/cm/2006/).

<sup>21</sup> The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations.

of the bill. Initially, in order to find legislative sponsors, meetings were organized with council members whose political profile made them possible candidates to sponsor the bill, namely Marc Erlich, Geroges Leventhal and Duchy Trachtenberg.

Meetings consisted of introducing the organizations participating in the coalition; presenting the background and explanation of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights as well as a brief description of its main points; giving testimonies of domestic worker abuses; and presenting the main survey outcomes and the petitions signed by the county's residents. Most of the meetings were held in the county's offices with the exception of a visit by Marc Erlich, a Montgomery County council member, to *Casa*, who wanted to meet with the group for the first time in their own location. This meeting, in particular, was attended by more than 15 committee women, and there was great excitement.

Participation at these meeting was generally high: at least five representatives from the Committee of Women Seeking Justice, five representatives of organizations from the coalition, *Casa's* staff member, normally the leader of the women's program, and one of the lawyers that supported the drafting of the bill and helped with the legal aspects.

The last activity was outreach to other domestic workers in the county. The women themselves were well aware of the main gathering places for immigrant domestic workers, particularly on Sundays, when most of them were not working. They divided the group into small teams of two to three women and sent them out at least twice a month on Saturdays and/or Sundays to find public places where they could meet other domestic workers, tell them about the committee and explain the proposed bill. The main areas they targeted were coffee shops, bus stops and Catholic churches, specifically where mass was held in Spanish. The outreach fulfilled two objectives: it drew more workers to

the group and served as a way of reaching domestic workers who were being abused, offering them support to leave exploitative jobs, particularly for those who felt trapped because they lived-in their places of employment and had no alternative housing or for those whose legal permanence was dependant on their employers.

Finally, the committee also joined other domestic workers organizations, nationally and internationally, sending representatives to these meetings to share their achievements and struggles and to learn from each other's experiences as organizations.<sup>22</sup>

In June 2008, the committee managed to successfully pass a bill to protect domestic workers' rights.<sup>23</sup> Along with a coalition of labor, religious, and community organizations, the committee successfully lobbied the county to pass the most comprehensive set of labor protections for domestic workers in the country. The legislation went into effect in January 2010. Among others, the law's main accomplishment was that all employers are now required to offer contracts on wages and benefits to domestic employees working over 20 hours a week. It also grants live-in housekeepers their own bedroom with a lock and reasonable access to a bathroom and the kitchen.

The year following the passage of the bill, A.S, *Casa's* staff in charge of the women's group, worked with the committee to promote the bill, to educate domestic workers about their rights and train them to negotiate contracts and to provide support for domestic workers in abusive situations. Currently, under new leadership, the group is mainly

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<sup>22</sup> For more information on national and international organizations go to [http://www.casademaryland.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=43&Itemid=70](http://www.casademaryland.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=43&Itemid=70).

<sup>23</sup> For the final version of the bill that was passed see: <http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/ocp/domestic/pdfs/Law.pdf>.

functioning as a support group to workers who are victims of abusive employers and participating in *Casa*'s pro immigration advocacy activities.

In this chapter, I described the factors that led the transformation of a service into an advocacy program from an organizational and structural perspective. Such transformation does not account, however, for the transformation that the women recruited for the program need to undergo in order to be effective mobilizers and advocates for domestic workers. Who were the women that joined the new program? What were their reasons for joining and engaging in civic work? In the next chapters, I show how I sought answers to these questions through an analysis of the women's life cycle, which spanned two or more countries.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> According to the women's narratives, the women's group went through different stages, and the name of the group changed several times. There are different versions of the names and sequence of events among the women. From what I gathered, this is approximately how it evolved. It began with the leadership and empowerment courses and training; then the first group was formed and called *Mujeres de Hoy* (Women of Today). It then turned into *Mujeres Unidas* (Women United), which organized the cooperative that offered cleaning services, and finally, in 2006, the *Comité de Mujeres Buscando Justicia* (The Committee of Women Seeking Justice) was formed.

## **Introduction to Life Stories**

### ***Chronology of Fieldwork***

From 2006 to 2008 I attended the group's meetings, events, festivities and meetings with the Montgomery County council to lobby for the bill. From the fall 2009 to the fall of 2010, I carried out life stories interviews with five participants. I met with them several times, wherever they wanted to meet, their home, workplace or café or restaurant, and we talked about their lives back home, childhood, migration and integration to the new environment. They also told me about their relationship to *Casa*, how they found about it and how they became activists. I worked with each participant, interviewing, transcribing, coding, and doing an initial analysis, before moving on to the next participant. This approach allowed me to listen to the interviews and reflect upon narratives to establish guidelines for subsequent interviews.

### ***Presentation of Life Stories***

The next five chapters present the life stories of five women in the order I worked with them. For each participant, I provide a short background of her country of origin, to contextualize the events of her life as she describes back home, and then I summarize briefly the main events in each life story. From these narratives, I focus on the descriptions of the women's lives as workers and activists throughout their life courses, underscoring how they describe their interactions with others and their perceptions of self and others with regards to work. The stories are told from the perspective of the participants.

The interviews were carried out in Spanish, and I transcribed all interviews in Spanish and worked through the analysis process in Atlas ti in Spanish. While writing each woman's life story, I selected excerpts to illustrate my description and translated those to English.

## Chapter 4

M.L.

*... I think that only a woman who has been exposed to the same conditions of abuse as a domestic worker, ... a woman who has lived it, [only she] is going to understand another one who is being abused. If they (Casa) send somebody who hasn't lived it, we lose it [the struggle].*

*Every woman who arrives at Casa has a different problem because we women, if we do not suffer for one thing, then we suffer for another [thing] (2008).*

### Background: Recent History

#### El Salvador



This tiny country is the most densely-populated state on the mainland of the Americas. Social inequality, poverty, political unrest, and natural disasters have shaped much of modern El Salvador. In the 1980s, El Salvador was ravaged by a bitter civil war. This was augmented by gross inequality between small and wealthy elite, which dominated the government and the economy, and the overwhelming majority of the population, many of whom lived - and continue to live - in abject squalor. The conflict in El Salvador

took place during a time of social upheaval and dissent within the military. The 1970s brought about growing public support for leftist movements as well as increased government repression including, ultimately, the creation of a government organized “death squad” to combat opposition movements. Both trends were also influenced by unrest in other Latin American countries.

In 1980, a series of failed military juntas took power, but none were able to quell the violence. By 1981, leftist guerrillas and political groups joined forces, forming the *Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front* known as the FMLN. Then, throughout the 1980s, civil war was waged between the FMLN and the United States supported Salvadoran military forces.

Increased international attention to the fighting led to an investigation by the US Congress into the conflict, and, eventually, the UN intervened to help mediate a resolution upon request of the two warring parties. In 1992, the UN facilitated the peace agreements that ended the war (*El Salvador Review*, 2011).

The 12 years of civil war claimed between 200,000 and 300,000 lives. The victims were Salvadorians and foreigners of all backgrounds and all social and economic classes. The death toll corresponded nearly to 1.5% of the population, and the war displaced about 30% (Kay, 2001).

Furthermore, the war caused damages of 2 billion and left a trail of human rights violations by both the government security forces and left-wing guerrillas. Just when the country was recovering from the civil unrest and was implementing some constitutional reforms intended to improve the administration of justice, Hurricane Mitch hit El Salvador in late October 1998. The hurricane that generated extreme rainfall, flooding

and landslides, killed hundreds of people and brought more devastation and destruction to a country that was already damaged by the time it had spent in armed conflict. Finally, in January and February 2001, El Salvador experienced two earthquakes in which 2,000 lost their lives and nearly 8,000 were injured. This last natural disaster also cost the country nearly 2 billion (*El Salvador Review*, 2011).

In the shadows of a long-term civil war and consecutive natural disasters, migration from El Salvador to the United States rapidly grew between 1990 and 2001, from 469,000 to 790,000 (*Social Research*, 2008: 958).

Today, El Salvador struggles to control corruption and crime. The country has one of the highest homicide rates in the world with an average of a dozen people murdered every day. Criminal gangs intimidate citizens on a regular basis, demanding protection payments from bus drivers and business owners. The current administration has not been successful in implementing anti-crime efforts, and the security threat is still tangible in the streets (*NACLA Report on the Americas*, 2009).

### **Meeting M.L.**

The first day I attended the new women's group meeting in September 2006, the one that became the Committee of Women Seeking Justice, there were seven participants who, as I observed over time, turned out to be some of the most active members in the group. Given it was a small gathering (as opposed to the large 50 + women's meetings at the employment program), we all introduced ourselves. I learned the participants' names and where they were from. M.L. was among one of these women, and she was noticeably articulate when asked to participate in the training session as part of the project to build a

cooperative. At this point, I discovered she was from El Salvador and was employed as a domestic worker.

Throughout the two years that I worked as a volunteer with the women's group, M.L. was always active and willing to contribute. I established a relationship with her, and we would chat and talk during events and festivities. When I asked her if she would be willing to be interviewed as part of my research, she was very forthcoming, and throughout the process, we established a close relationship, even when we were both very conscious of the different – and even opposed – social positions we occupy in the social structure.

### **Early Years: Confronting Injustice**

M.L. described her background as “very poor.” She explained that her mother studied to be a teacher but could not graduate and that her father was from a “middle class” background and had a trade as an electrician. He owned a small business where all eight children, including herself, had to take turns working, yet it was the income from the business that allowed each of them to go to school.

M.L.'s references/narrative of her childhood revolved around school. She started attending when she was seven and never missed a year. She portrayed herself as a very dedicated student, who loved reading and found entertainment in immersing herself in whatever reading material she could get hold of, books, magazines and periodicals, since there were no resources at home to buy them.

Throughout her primary and secondary school years, she recollected how she excelled in her studies and how her good grades got her into the *Escuela Nacional de Comercio*, a

technical school at the high school level, where she pursued a degree as an executive secretary and accountant. She constantly portrayed herself through others' words. She made reference to teachers that constantly praised her and to the awards she received during her school life that led to her attendance at the technical school she wanted.

Nonetheless, she was unable to realize the next part of her dream: attending the National University. She recalls:

*Back then, I was always characterized as doing well; I liked to stand out, and thank God, I made it. I couldn't go on studying, but I almost managed to get into the National University. When I finished my technical degree, I tried to go to college, but they [the ruling military] closed the University.*

From her early years, M.L. told two stories of her first encounters with discriminatory situations. In both situations, she was very vocal and confronted the wrongdoers, even when they were adults. From her current perspective, after years as a political activist and a workers' rights activist, these were the antecedents of her call to fight injustice.

The first story refers to her relationship with her father. Though she does not talk much about family life during her early years, M.L. often reflected on this relationship. She explained that her father never liked her, and that in her childhood, he made this point clear by ostensibly bringing gifts, cakes, etc. to her brothers and sisters but never to her. Her mother, she recalled, never intervened in her favour because, M.L. explained, the father was the "provider" and, as such, could dictate favors as he chose. Although she recalled confronting both of them as to why she was treated differently, she never got an answer.

The second story took place in middle school. M.L. described herself as a dedicated and competitive student who was always trying to be among the best in the class. She

recalled she was around twelve when she encountered a teacher who was biased against her. M.L. described the relationship:

*... I remember she didn't sympathize with me. She did not look at my school work [my abilities as a student]; she looked at me [only] as a person, maybe because I was poor. She was unfair with my grades, and that was the first time that I said to myself, 'I have to fight for my rights.' And, I went up to the teacher to talk to her.*

### **Young Adulthood: Living The Militant Life**

The growing political unrest against the military dictatorship in El Salvador in the mid-1970s coincided with M.L.'s years at the *Escuela Nacional de Comercio*. This context became an important part of the students' movement at the technical school, which linked itself to emerging leftist parties. She explained that university students would invite them to meetings to discuss the situation in their country and to recruit the technical school students to the movement. She became part of the *Asociacion de Estudiantes de Secundaria* (Association of High School Students), which she described as the beginning of her political activism.

*Then, when I was in high school, we were more steeped into the country's history, and I was convinced that the military's dictatorship was very unjust. One of the first massacres that took place in the city was against students, - around 1975 I think - and many students from my school were killed. In rural areas, we knew they were happening. Nobody ever found out where they dumped the more than 100 bodies. I was a teenager when it happened, and this event gave me more courage and more strength to keep going and to protest.*

The beginnings of M.L.'s (paid) work life were intertwined with her political activism. She recalled that when she graduated as an executive secretary, there were no jobs to secure. Consequently, she gave more time and effort to her role as an activist with the student organization as she was fully dedicated to its cause and because it could provide basic living needs to its militants.

During these years, M.L. narrated how she got involved with a higher level militant and became pregnant. Pregnancy and childcare limited the scope of her activities in the group as she could not join trainings or those fighting in the countryside. After her daughter was born and could walk, however, she went back *to la louche* (the fight) and joined a committee of mothers for the politically “disappeared,” which meant persons that were taken and/or killed by the military with no official record left of the event or the whereabouts of the political prisoners:

*I was in charge of registering the denunciation about their sons and daughters who had disappeared, were murdered; then, I would write down their stories, and as I heard them, I felt as if they had happened to me ....*

The group was also in charge of keeping contact with the prisoners as well as advocating against the horrific abuses these people were subject to in prison. M.L. recalled that the group too was connected with others like them in Latin American countries that were also under a dictatorship – like Argentina.

Constant fear and the consciousness of danger pervaded M.L.’s narrative as a militant in El Salvador during these years. She referred to the dire consequences many of her co-militants suffered.

*While I belonged to this group, many of the women were killed in their homes or mutilated. [They] sometimes survived. If they couldn’t find the woman, they [the government?] would kill her family. At night, at my mother’s house when the dogs howled, I always thought they were coming to get me. Thank God nothing ever happened; [it seemed] I was [always] about to be captured, but nothing happened.*

### **Merging Work and Activism**

Towards the end of the war, when the peace agreements were nearing, M.L. got a job at the *Tribunal Supremo Electoral* (Supreme Electoral Court) as a federal employee, where she worked for around 13 years. She also joined the newly formed *Convergencia*

*Democratiza* (Democratic Convergence), a leftist political party, to continue her political work. She portrayed herself as an important and well-known member of the party, always involved in different groups and in charge of organizing some of them, such as a women's group, her neighbourhood group and others:

*I never wore the party's shirt because it was not necessary; people knew I was one of the speakers at the meetings. I think that one is born with this charisma, this charisma for convincing or attracting people. I didn't need a party's shirt because when people listened to me, they knew who I was.*

While working for the *Tribunal*, M.L. also referenced her participation in the institution's union. She described successfully fighting for better working conditions and salary increases.

### **Motherhood and Migration**

Throughout our meetings, M.L. often reflected on her relationships and how she became the sole caretaker for her two daughters:

*Well, I will tell you, on the sentimental side, my life has not been very good.*

She described her love story with one of the commanders in the militant group. She fell in love when she was very young, and they maintained a relationship that survived the logistical obstacles that their militant life imposed. Given the war conditions, she had no access to birth control and, as a result, became pregnant. She was then left mostly alone with her child because her partner's life as a high ranked militant kept him from establishing any kind of stable family life. However, M.L. maintained their long-distance relationship for a period of time, communicating through notes sent through co-militants or through *Radio Venceremos*, the radio station operated by the leftist movement that, among others, served as a communication vehicle for people in combat zones to

exchange messages with families and friends. M.L. recalled how her child's father was sent to different locations, was made a military prisoner, and eventually, once released, was forced to live abroad for protection. He never met his daughter or provided for her until she was 8 or 9. Then, he was able, during a brief visit to El Salvador, to meet with her, leaving soon thereafter. He did not see his daughter again until she was fully grown.

After a number of years had passed, M.L. married another man with whom she had another girl. He took care of them, and for a while, she was not alone. But the relationship had a dramatic end when she discovered him involved with her sister. Having been through so many difficult and dangerous situations, M.L. still described this episode as one of the worst in her life.

*I was really very angry. Before, every time I tried to tell this story, I would cry .... The worst for me was that the other woman was part of my family .... It was so painful because the other woman was my sister .... And things got even worse because she told my family that I had made up the whole story .... She managed to make my whole family believe her and turn against me, except for my older brother. And though they all turned their backs on me, I kept up the struggle for my girls and myself. I even had to spend a New Year's Eve alone with my daughters; I hugged them and told them that, 'We were our family and would always be together.'*

Since then, M.L. has been a single mother and the only household provider. When she lost her job in 2003 and spent two to three months unemployed, she decided that "going North" was the only way to keep feeding her family and sending the girls to school because of the lack of employment opportunities.

*Oh No! Thank God I did not have to suffer the journey through Mexico and the crossings because I came with a visa ... a tourist visa .... I really admire people who face this journey ... so much suffering ....*

M.L. told the story of how she obtained a visa, which was much prized and difficult to acquire, leaving most Salvadorians with no option but to undertake a dangerous journey

North. While still working for the government, she decided to apply for a tourist visa in case she had the opportunity to visit the US. Back then, she did not foresee migrating. The process turned out to be rather smooth, given that she was a federal employee and that she had held the job for more than 12 years. She got a 10 year tourist visa, and though the opportunity to visit never came, M.L. used it the following year when the institution she worked for downsized and left her unemployed with no means to provide for her two daughters. She decided to move to the US and search for a job, leaving her two girls behind, as she could not find another job in El Salvador.

From my perspective, M.L.'s decision was hard to understand. M.L. had survival experience. How could a woman like her, who was so tied to her community, where she was born, grew up, fought a war, had children and family, decide to leave? I was interested to know why M.L. resolved to migrate, to break ties with the space that had given her emotional safety and to delve into the unknown.

Listening to M.L., I realized that her lack of opportunities to earn a living back home was aggravated by the fact that she had nobody to turn to for support. She was the only income earner in the household, and she had heard about the experiences of others who had migrated before her, how they had formed a solid network for those left behind.

These observations encouraged her decision that was otherwise a frightening one.<sup>25</sup>

*In August, they began laying off 1500 employees, and I lost my job. By October, I was desperate. I had no other choice but to leave for the US. I was a woman alone with two daughters; the only thing I could do was come here, so my daughters could go on studying.*

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<sup>25</sup> By 2003, the year when M.L. became unemployed, millions of Salvadorians had left their home and established themselves in the U.S. The Washington DC Metropolitan Area is one of the primary destinations for Salvadorians, among other large cities such as San Francisco, California, Chicago, Illinois and Houston, Texas.

Once the decision was made, M.L. contacted her high school friend, who left years before with her family, fleeing from the war, to live in the Washington DC Metropolitan Area.

*Well, what I want to tell you is that I called my friend and told her I had been unemployed and was really getting desperate. She told to come to the US. She offered her house and told me not to worry about the ticket; she would send me money and find me a job right away.*

Then, M.L. described the day that changed her life forever.

*I left on October 31<sup>st</sup>, and thank God, I only traveled for 6 hours. And, I was here! I brought a small suitcase with me; I brought cheese, bread, and other things from 'there' that you cannot find 'here' .... [the] next day she [my friend] took me to the place where I was going to work in Germantown. Imagine how I felt; I didn't know anything ....*

Every time I read M.L.'s account of the day she migrated, changed her place of residence, it sounds incredibly distressing to me. M.L. transitioned from one place to the other and began a completely new life on the very next day, and yet she found the emotional stability to keep going.

M.L. migrated to the US strictly in search of work to provide for her daughters back home. Apart from bringing a small piece of luggage with a few of her belongings and lots of her nostalgic items, M.L. also brought with her a cultural world view permeated by her experiences and embodied in her identities. Her life history illustrates how she used these resources to make sense of her new environment. Certainly, her history of fighting against injustice and for her rights is an important piece of her cultural luggage.

### **In the United States: Becoming a Domestic Worker**

Once in the US, M.L.'s life and narrative evolved around work and her long distance relationship with her daughters, who stayed behind because they were studying and had

no visas to come to the US. She joined the employment program at *Casa* and eventually was one of the founders of the Committee of Women Seeking Justice.

Her first employment in the US involved child-care and cleaning, and it was M.L.'s first experience as a domestic worker as she had never performed paid domestic work back home. Though she hardly ever complained about having to take this kind of job, talking to other women in the group, she once said:

*I had never been a domestic worker; I always tried to do better, to excel. I want something different for myself. I want more because that is the way human beings are; we always want more ....*

She did not stay long in this first job. Although she assured me that the “lady” was very nice to her, M.L. had a number of complaints. She was paid very little; the place was far away, particularly from the friend who brought her to the US; and her employer was working all day, so M.L. felt uncomfortable as she was left alone with the husband for long periods of time.

After six months, M.L. found another job through the same friend. They offered to pay her more, and it was closer to her friend as well as to public transportation.

Nonetheless, M.L. described her experience in this house as her worst employment experience. Not only did she suffer abusive conditions of work, but she was harassed by the male employer. It prompted her to address the differences she perceived within the Latino community:

*The problem ... was that they were those Hispanics that had no education; they could not read or write ... no principles .... [Then there are those that] because they are residents, [think] they are better than everyone. I don't understand why we have to mistreat our own people. Even in the women's group at Casa, when our leader was from El Salvador, she would mistreat the women who joined the group and were from other countries. I commented in the group that we should help each other, share what we know, instead of discriminating among ourselves.*

The general mistreatment she suffered in this job led her to go back to searching for yet another job, but this time, it took her much longer to find employment and better work conditions. During this period, she discovered the employment program at *Casa* through a friend who told her about the organization. She started attending, but it would take three years until she found another job while utilizing this program at *Casa*.

In the meantime, the situation at the job worsened as the husband of the employer tried to rape her on more than one occasion:

*I was asleep with the little girl I took care of when the man entered the room .... The first thing I did was to wake her up, and he told her to shut up .... He was Latino .... I screamed, and as he tried to grab me, I picked up the phone and told him I was calling the police .... Only when I started dialing he stopped and went away. I cried so much and asked myself, 'Why this should happen to me?' I never gave him any reason ....*

But this time, M.L. had no place to retreat. She could not find another job right away, and she felt that her only resource, her friend's house, was out of reach this time. By then, her vulnerable situation became a conscious part of her reality. M.L. reflected on this situation for immigrant women in similar situations:

*... the point is that here [in the US] the women are not protected, the domestic workers. And people [who were once immigrants] who are already residents or citizens, many of them want to exploit you. When you arrive at a place where you do not know the law, your rights, well, everybody wants to take advantage of you. These were the reasons that motivated me most to fight for the women's group.*

After what M.L. described as three long years at this job, she finally managed to find another one through a woman who also attended the employment program. This time, she said, it was a Bolivian lady at *Casa* that recommended her for work with a family.

*I take care of two children, also from Bolivia. They are cousins. I am only in charge of the children; I don't have to clean or do anything else. They treat me well; they pay me for the holidays .... This past 4<sup>th</sup> of July was my first holiday [that I celebrated] ever since I have been in the US ....*

At the same time, once M.L. joined *Casa*, she took advantage of other opportunities there. She joined the health promotion program, and after taking the training, became a “health promoter.”<sup>26</sup> The job entailed working mostly on weekends, which did not conflict with her weekday job.

### **Reconfiguring Activism in the United States**

During one of the employment program meetings at *Casa*, M.L. received a flyer inviting women to participate in a support group for immigrant women in the area. When she called, she spoke to D.P., a long-term staff member at *Casa* who was in charge, at this point, of the incipient initiative to build a support group for immigrant women:

*‘The woman who felt that she had problems could join the group,’ D.P. told me. She identified with me because she was also from El Salvador. We talked, and that was how I decided I wanted to attend one of the meetings – and I went. And, in these first meetings, they [the women] had just named the group’s directive, and E.C., H.L. and others were part of it.*

M.L. decided to join the group, even though she commented that there were very few participants. Ever since, M.L. has portrayed herself as an advisor, first to D.P. and later to A.S., who took over the group’s leadership when *Casa* hired her exclusively for this purpose. M.L. described how she advised D.P., during the group’s first stages:

*... and I would tell her we have to multiply the group; we have to motivate the women. You have to call; don’t get tired of calling. Sooner or later, these people will come. You have to ask them how they are doing first, how is their health, how is everything going. And she [D.P.] would tell me I was right, and she would call and call. Because I belonged to a women’s group in my country, I told her I would give her some tips, so she could get guidance. She always listened to me.*

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<sup>26</sup> According to *Casa*’s webpage, health promoters are trained to reach out to the community to promote health education and to help improve access to health screenings as well as to promote treatment services for HIV and cancer and services for tobacco use prevention.

M.L. then described her conversations with A.S., once she took over the program:

*... so I have told A.S. often, 'A.S. this shouldn't be this way.' I have also told her that for the group to grow you have to do this and that ... and you can see the results because now more people are coming to the meetings, from different places also ....*

Telling the story of the group's development, M.L. also referred to projects/efforts that took place before the idea of fighting for legislation to protect domestic workers dominated the group's agenda. She told me about the idea of building a *Center for Women* (Centro para la Mujer) to offer low-income immigrants in general and particularly domestic workers a training program, shelter, support groups, and other services. Again, M.L. distanced herself from other participants:

*... we would get together, more or less 6 or 7 women, to talk about the Center – what we wanted it to offer, how we wanted it. I don't blame the women ... because often they are women who have had no education, and they ignore reality. I think that [these] women need to have something, programs for them to integrate, psychological treatment .... Well, I talked so much, and everything I said was written down by the staff who led the sessions.*

Another point she reiterated was the importance of having lived through abuse as a domestic worker to be able to understand and support others and even to have the experience necessary to lead the group. M.L. indicated on different occasions that some of the participants, though they were among the leaders of the group, had never worked in domestic service and/or had never suffered abuse. For her, these women were not qualified to speak for the group. She referred to H.S., who was president of the committee for a period:

*Mrs. H.S., for example, she goes out and talks and says, and I think that you have to have lived it to be able to talk. As far as I know, the life she has always had has been quite a good life .... I don't know how she can speak for the group if she hasn't ever worked as a domestic worker. I think that abuse and all that, only someone who*

*has lived it 'in its own skin' can talk about it, someone who knows what that is.*

She was also critical of others who had been elected president of the committee. Talking about A.P., a younger woman who was very active in the group, M.L. often commented that she was not ready to be president of the group either. From her perspective, A.P. lacked education and thus was not articulate enough to represent the group. Most of all, she emphasized that A had not suffered abuse:

*... I notice that she has no further aspirations .... It's like she does not want to move ahead .... She always talks about how happy she is doing what she does.*

I observed that in telling her story to me, M.L. presented herself as a person who is always concerned with helping others. She talked about the “great satisfaction” she derived from “serving and helping others” while often neglecting to take care of herself. She emphasized the importance of supporting other women who are subject to unfair work conditions and abuse.

She referred, at length, to her relationships with the women who arrived in the program. M.L. described how an important part of the group’s activities was to tend to the women that were being abused and who contacted *Casa* in different ways. Often the women would join the group during meetings, and the participants took charge of offering support and helping them find more stability:

*Every woman who arrives at Casa has a different problem because we women, if we do not suffer for one thing, then we suffer for another [thing]. And that's what helps us, guides us, so we can help other women or understand them when they are suffering. That happened to Miriam, the Peruvian. It was really sad to listen to her because she would say that her 'life was over' right then, and I would tell her that it was actually 'just beginning.' I think I managed to help her because one day I met her, and she ran towards me to give a hug and told me I was right!*

According to M.L., the process that led towards the passage of the domestic worker's bill began when the complaints of abuse increased and when the number of women coming to the meetings at *Casa* to ask for help increased. Specifically, they were looking for ways to address mistreatment, having no free days, insufficient or no pay, etc. The lawyers at *Casa* who attended the meetings started mobilizing and proposed working on a bill to protect domestic workers' rights. M.L. recalled that the first activity they were involved in was to collect signatures to support the project, following the guidance of the county council members. She described the very hard work they conducted for long weekends:

*We started collecting signatures because they [the county council members] had told us that they could not take the project just like that; we needed to show support. And, it was snowing, and people did not want to come out at first .... Then, many of us would get together, so we could gather signatures. And, under the snow, we would work so much ... that was during weekends ....*

Once enough signatures were gathered, led by the lawyers at *Casa*, the group started drafting the bill, and the process of lobbying with individual council members and seeking the support of other organizations took place.

M.L., however, was very critical of the way the Committee was working after the passage of the bill. Once A.S. resigned and *Casa* hired another staff member to lead the group, she asserted that the group had no priorities. She complained that the new leader needed training, so she could carry on the work done thus far, disseminating the law and promoting domestic workers' rights. Moreover, she observed that though the group was mainly dedicated to 'rescuing' workers that were being subject to abuse and helping them find stability, nothing was done to persuade these women to join the group, so they could, in turn, help other women:

*Very often, the women who are helped by the group, once they get what they want, they just leave. That is not the objective; the objective is that they join the group. They become part of it and give their testimony saying ‘ ... I’ve suffered this, ... and here I got support .... because then others will come, and they [the ones who have been given support] will be able to give them [the ones who are suffering] hope. But, that is not what is happening.*

In 2009, M.L. told me she joined a leftist group within the area’s Salvadorian community to support Mauricio Funes, the then El Salvadorian presidential candidate for the *Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberacion Nacional* (The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front):

*They say he is heading the poles .... If it were in my hands [to be able to do so], I would go to the elections [in El Salvador] and come back, but it can’t be done.*

### **Preliminary Comments**

Since her early childhood, M.L. has developed a clear sense of justice and has always fought back when faced with unfair situations, both at the family and institutional level, where she quickly realized that being poor was a condition that led to discrimination, abuse and unequal treatment. As she grew into young adulthood, her sense of living in an unjust society contributed to her being co-opted by the revolutionary groups that were expanding during these years (the 1970s) and were enlisting college and high school students.

## Chapter 5

### E.C.

*... My biological mother did not send me to school ... ever ... because she needed a nanny to take care of her children .... So many things I have gathered in my life .... These are the events that have led me to get involved in the project at Casa (2009).*

### Background: Recent History



Nicaragua, the largest country in Central America, has a long history of poverty, inequalities, and interventions by the United States. For decades, Nicaragua has been ranked one of the poorest countries in the world, with more than two-thirds of its population living in chronic poverty (Herrera, 2009). More currently, Nicaragua has also been affected by natural disasters, armed conflicts, and a dictatorship overthrown in a revolution followed by civil war. Consequently, in the past three decades, unstable

employment, lack of money, social exclusion and deteriorating environmental and living conditions have limited the choices Nicaraguans have in planning for their futures.

In 1979, the leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) took control of the government and introduced social, political, and economic changes. The FSLN ruled Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990, instituting and improving policies of mass literacy, health care, education, land redistribution and gender equality (Peace, 2010). In 1981, oppositional militias known as *Contras* received support from the US government to resist the Sandinista government, which the US opposed fiercely given its leftist tendencies.

Throughout the 1980s, the *Contras* engaged in a campaign of economic sabotage and violent attacks on both state and civilian targets in an attempt to combat the Sandinista government. For almost a decade, the Sandinista army and *Contra* rebels fought a brutal civil war that left the country's economy severely affected. The FSLN lost elections in 1990 to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro but was able to retain several seats in the legislature. After a decade of civil war and a US embargo, the already damaged economy deteriorated further when Nicaragua was hit by Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

Although the political situation has been stabilized, the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. As of 2010, approximately 48% of the population lives below the poverty line, and unemployment stands at around 8 percent of the labor force, numbering approximately 2.3 million (Aliprandini, 2011).

The whole Nicaraguan society, poor and rich alike, has been affected by the events discussed above. Consequently, since 1990, given the high unemployment rates, Nicaraguans have been migrating to other places within Nicaragua or even abroad in an

effort to find work. In recent decades, it is estimated that around 500,000 Nicaraguans are living abroad with an annual net migration of around 20,000 people (Herrera, 2009).

### **Meeting E.C.**

E.C. was also an active member of the Committee. I met her at the first training meeting for the cooperative after the Committee was formed. The session had already started when she walked in and joined the group. Although she participated when asked, I noticed that she had a very skeptical attitude towards what was being discussed. She often shook her head as if disagreeing with what the others were saying and, at times, was slow in responding to the trainer's questions. She did not approve of the cooperative project as she had participated in the previous experience that had failed. She made a strong first impression on me as she conveyed her ideas clearly and often had a stern look on her face and yet still had a friendly smile.

During concurrent meetings, I started approaching E.C. and quickly established rapport with her. She has an acute sense of humor, and we enjoyed laughing together. She also showed interest in my research project and was very quickly interested in participating. From the way E.C. carried herself, her humor, her involvement with the group, I could never imagine the story she carried with her.

### **Early Years: Living with Tragedy**

As we sat down for our first "formal" interview, I asked E.C. about her life in her native country, Nicaragua. In a natural way, almost as if we were talking about someone else's life, she started narrating the tragic events of her early childhood and adolescence.

E.C. was born to a domestic worker for a wealthy family in the Atlantic region of Nicaragua. Her mother was abused by the young son of the house master (*el señor*, she explained). To protect the son, the family never told him about his child and made arrangements with E.C.'s mother to have her brought up by a wealthy relative from her father's family. At the age of four, E.C. recalls with precision how she witnessed her adoptive mother's murder. She was shot by her lover right in front of E.C.:

*One time, from night to morning (all of a sudden), they murdered the lady [her adoptive mother], and it was a very hard stroke for me because I went from wealth to poverty .... Yes I remember ... because when my mother was murdered, I was the only person with her .... I was hiding behind her ... her lover killed her ... something was happening .... people would tell him that she was never going to marry him because he was poor, and she was never going to leave her husband ... he got mad ....*

With the murder, E.C.'s life changed drastically. She was then sent by her biological mother to a remote area in the countryside to live with her maternal grandmother, and as soon as she could help around the house, her biological mother took E.C. to her house in a village where she was currently living, hours away from the grandmother, to tend to her sisters and brothers and do housework. Since then, she never stopped working, though it took many years until she saw her first paycheck:

*It was then that my [biological] mother picks me up and takes [me] to a [small] farm (finca), where, well, civilization did not exist .... That [the farm] belonged to her mother, my grandmother. I don't know what was arranged between my aunt or adoptive mother, but right after I was born, I was taken from Managua to the Atlantic region, and then from this village (pueblo). After the murder[of my adoptive mother], they [my biological family] took me even further, to a [small] farm, where my [biological] mother's family lived, out in the countryside, in the middle of nowhere, only fields, no drinking water, no electricity ....*

E.C.'s early years were further marked by constant abuse from her mother. In addition to having her work all day and not allowing her to go to school, E.C. was subject to constant battering:

*My biological mother did not send me to school ... ever ... because she needed a nanny to take care of her children. Truth is ... this woman [my biological mother] mistreated me a lot ....*

### **Young Adulthood: Living with Abuse**

Early in her adolescent years, E.C. recalls that she suffered rape by an acquaintance of her mother, who paid her mother to have sexual relations with her, and became pregnant. Before she turned 13, E.C. already had her own child to tend to, in addition to caring for her siblings:

*I did not even know I was pregnant; I knew nothing .... I started noticing that my belly was growing .... I felt heavy and ate limes all the time. Then I heard that people started making comments, and eventually, I was sent to the doctor. And, it turned out I was pregnant, ... and my mother was pregnant again also ... what a shame! Mother and daughter pregnant at the same time!*

Throughout her narrative, E.C. refers often to her search for her father. It is as if it had been a motivation to keep going, the hope to eventually meet him. After a life long search, she finally managed to find him in Mexico and talk to him on the phone, only to find out that he never even knew she existed:

*After I finally find my father, he tells me that he never knew that I existed; for me, it was the end of the world .... I was asking God, 'Why?' After all I had suffered, [why did] I have to go through this ... because my mother never told him that I was born, and the whole family around also never told him anything; everybody knew .... People are very selfish .... When I finally managed to get in touch with him, ... it was like a fairy tale .... I searched [for] this man so much, and my son came across the number by chance. I called once, and it was right. Of course, when I sent him the letter explaining my situation, that is when he found out about me .... That was recently .... I was already living here in the US ....*

The drive to find her father, combined with the desperate need to flee her life of abuse, led E.C. to leave her mother's house and her son behind and move close to the capital, Managua. At fourteen, she found herself outside of her abusive home for the first time.

### **Living Without Human Rights: "Life is Work"**

For E.C., life was and continues to be "work." Ever since her adoptive mother died, she was forced to work at the house and take care of siblings. Now, she wanted to work outside of the home. Consequently, E.C. accepted a domestic offer from a relative on her father's side to go and work at a family friend's house close to Managua.

Her first encounter with work outside her mother's home was a harsh one. E.C. recalls the family she worked for always repeated the narrative that "She was part of the family," and, as a result, they were constantly communicating to E.C. that was supposed to be there "to help." But the reality was that work days were at least fourteen hours long, and she had to be on call always, day and night. There were no days off and no pay. E.C. explains that even though the conditions were terrible, it was very difficult for her to leave the place because it was a small farm in a remote area, far away from the city.

*The problem was that the man (el señor) lived far away, in the city but on a farm. It was very large, and one had to walk many kilometers to go take the bus. I got desperate because I wanted to leave but did not know what to do; I had no money. There was no way. I had to put up with it for three years until I managed to flee/escape, ... and they kept saying they had me as their adoptive daughter .... But, I was not their daughter, and they did not pay [me]. And, I had a son to feed ... I was just a girl with no experience, who knew nothing. I was 14 years old ....*

Consequently, it took her three years to get another job in the city. Although conditions were just as difficult as in her first job, for the first time she was earning money and sending it to cover her son's expenses, who stayed back in her village.

E.C. referred also to the general conditions of domestic work in her country back then before the triumph of the Sandinista revolution. Under the Somoza family, who ruled the country for four decades, not only did domestic workers have no labor rights, but conditions of servitude were normalized. After the Revolution, E.C. argued that labor legislation changed, and since then, domestic work has been regulated by labor laws. Nonetheless, she says, domestic workers do not exercise their rights. There are no institutional structures in place that the women can access, that provide legal support for domestic workers. Given the huge social gap between employer and domestic worker, they are also scared of employers, as E.C. described, of any action they might take against them. She explained:

*Before the revolution, ..., I told you, ... people worked 14 hours, and it was not that you would then go to bed .... If the men (los señores) would come home at 2 o'clock in the morning and were hungry, ... you had to get up and cook for them .... After the triumph of the revolution, the law established that we have the right to work [only] 8 hours, ... but this is something that hardly ever happens because people are very scared ... of holding up their heads and saying, 'These are my rights,' ... and people know; often they [the workers] know, but they are scared of denouncing their employers ....*

### **Migration and Becoming Conscious of Her Rights**

E.C.'s first paid job lasted for a couple of years until she heard of a family of diplomats that was searching for a domestic worker who would be willing to eventually move abroad with them. E.C. saw this job opportunity as the possibility for legally migrating North and for earning a better salary to be able to provide for her son and family.

She seized the opportunity and changed jobs. It turned out to be a long and hard journey until she moved to the US:

*Everything has been difficult for me. I worked 8 years with diplomats, so I could come here with papers. Eight years I endured ....*

After three years working for the family of diplomats in Managua, they were transferred to Costa Rica, and they offered for E.C. to move with them. She worked for them for five years in Costa Rica, which she described as hard ones. E.C. described the lady she worked for as “an extremely arrogant person, who ... harbored so much hatred ....” E.C. felt her employer despised poor people as E.C. often had a long work schedule and was not treated well. For the first time in my interviews with E.C., I noticed that E.C. referred to challenging the employer and refusing to put up with the mistreatment and abuse. Throughout this experience, however, E.C. was conscious of risking her income and that of her family’s as she was the “pillar of her house,” the breadwinner. E.C. left the job for a couple of months until the employer begged her to come back, and E.C. was then able to negotiate better conditions.

Eventually, in 1996, E.C. managed to fulfill her objective when she moved to the US, the Washington DC Metropolitan Area, employed by the same family of diplomats.

### **Becoming a Domestic Worker in the United States**

According to E.C., the work conditions and the relationship to her employer only got worse once they were established in the US:

*... but she was a person that came here to practice exactly what she used to in my country; she [the lady who employed me] thinks that we [domestic workers from Nicaragua] are used to this situation. She does not realize we were oppressed and submitted to the situation .... She feels she has more power over me, and she feels [empowered] ... to say that [because she can say] ‘she [meaning me] is here alone, does not speak the language, and has a dependent visa.’ In other words, she is not capable of defending herself ....*

During the following two years, E.C. was subject to ever worsening conditions. The contract she had signed established a salary that she was never paid. Weekly, she received around one hundred US dollars. After sending money home to her family, E.C. was left with nothing:

*I really became desperate ... because look, I had to go around with the only pair of jeans I had and the one blouse because of the crumbs that I would get after taxes. She [the lady who employed me] would tell me that I had to send it [the money] all to my family .... It was not even enough for them, and I was left with no money to pay for a bus fare to go out, eat or take the metro.*

Eventually, E.C. says that the employer would not let her eat in the house anymore:

*... and then, she told me that now we were in the 'real' world. And, she started denying me food .... She would not allow me to eat .... They bought a small dog. It was an excuse. They bought the dog, and whatever was left of the food, she would tell me it was for Peggy, the dog .... There was nothing much left ever ....*

Deprived of funds, E.C.'s sense of powerlessness became overwhelming.

Additionally, she was sleeping on a mattress on the floor, eating very little, and living in a city that as E.C. says, "I didn't even know how to ask about the bus and the fare."

*I was not in a position to say anything to her .... I just couldn't .... She [the lady who employed me] got here and said, 'Now I am among gringos, and this poor woman [meaning me], I can marginalize her and abuse her' .... It is like you are left abandoned, on your own, to fend for yourself.*

### **Networking and Fighting for Her Rights**

In one of E.C.'s trips to send money to her family, the very rare occasions she would leave the house, she met a woman who was also a Latina immigrant and a domestic worker. They would talk to each other occasionally, and eventually, the woman invited

her to attend weekend meetings organized by Opus Dei for immigrant young women, which she started attending regularly.<sup>27</sup>

According to E.C., the Opus Dei center in Tenleytown, Washington DC, carried out weekend meetings that worked as support groups for young immigrant women, particularly Latinas, given that the gatherings were led by a Spanish speaking member of the center. She described the main objective of the group as providing emotional support for the recently arrived immigrants and keeping them away from “...boyfriends with whom they could get involved and in trouble.” The center also had a small chapel that held mass in Spanish on Sundays.

Through these meetings, E.C. connected to other young women who had come to the US as domestic workers as well. She recalled how she first heard about *Casa*:

*One evening, I was watching the news in the kitchen and the case of Erica, a Colombian girl, was featured on TV .... They [the newscasters] talked about the abuse she was suffering by her employers and how she was rescued<sup>28</sup> ... and that her case was being handled by an organization called Casa .... When they interviewed her, I thought ... I know this girl .... I've seen her at the Opus Dei meetings! When I went back to the meeting, I asked a friend who was close to Erica, and she confirmed that it was her on the news. Then I asked her about Casa, and she explained to me what it was and gave me the address. And, I thought ... well if she [Erica] can denounce her employers and get help, so can I! The following weekend I went ....*

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<sup>27</sup> The Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei, commonly known as Opus Dei (Latin for "The Work of God") or the Work, is an international prelature of the Roman Catholic Church, comprising ordinary lay people and secular priests headed by a prelate. Their mission is to spread Catholic teaching and to share the message that everyone is called to become a saint and an apostle of Jesus Christ. As such, ordinary life is a path to sanctity. Critics accuse Opus Dei of elitism and of being a major force on the Catholic right opposing social change. For more information see: <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Opus%20Dei>>.

<sup>28</sup> Throughout the text, I use the term *rescue* as it is used by women at *Casa* to refer to the cases where *Casa's* lawyers and members of the Committee go to the employers' houses to pick up the domestic worker, who otherwise has not managed to leave the employment, either because she is threatened by the employers because they retain her documents or because she does not know what to do, where to go, as described here by participants who have lived it, either themselves or by being part of a *rescue*. Throughout the text, I will use the term.

E.C. recalled how she felt the first time she went to *Casa*. She felt insecure; her self-esteem was low; and she was psychologically very fragile. It took her two trips to *Casa* to gather the courage to tell her story. Back then, in 1998, there were two long-term staff members of *Casa* in charge of the women's group. After two long interviews with each of them, E.C. was advised to leave the house, so they could start the legal process.

Through the friends she made at the Opus Dei meetings, she found another job and started forming plans to leave. *Casa* helped her apply for a Temporary Permit Status (TPS), which applied, during this time period, to some Central American nationals. Empowered by the support of *Casa*, though the employer tried to send her back to Nicaragua and contacted the State Department to have her visa cancelled, E.C. moved ahead with her plans, packed her belongings and as E.C. said, “ ... left through the front door, holding my head up high ....”

Together with *Casa's* lawyers, E.C. decided to go ahead with the legal case against her former employer. E.C. recalled, however, that though *Casa* was invested in taking and winning as many cases for abused domestic workers as they could, the lawyers were careless when it came to negotiating the agreement with E.C.'s former employer. She ended settling for less than half of the amount that was established in the demand.

The subsequent job E.C. took was with an American couple, and both husband and wife were lawyers. Prior to coming to the Washington DC area, they had lived in California, where he was a judge. E.C. described them as decent employers, meaning they were respectful of her hours and paid her a fair salary. Nonetheless, they constantly referred to their experience with Mexicans and other Latinos in California and described them to E.C. as corrupt. E.C. felt constantly insulted as they alluded to Mexicans and

other Latinos in a discriminatory way and, consequently, decided to search for another job. She felt she had come a long way since she arrived in the US as she was empowered by the experience of being able to move away from the abusive situation she had been subject to for so many years. E.C. was able to fight for her rights.

Eventually, E.C. managed to find another job where she has been working for the past six years. She described her current situation as a job “ ... where I feel they respect me and pay a decent salary.” During the years she has been with these employers they have helped her apply and get her residency:

*Look, I tell you, the truth is that this is a job that when I had just arrived there were many conflicts, but she [the employer] has learned to respect me. And, I have come to understand her better .... She really respects me [now], and I feel good that they value what I am doing at their house and [that they are] taking into account my opinion ....*

### **From Being Helped to Helping: Working for Collective Rights**

The legal process took a whole year during which E.C. started attending an incipient women’s group at *Casa*. Once she won her case, she felt the call to help others:

*When I won my case, I also became much more interested in participating at Casa’s activities to help other women ... because I realized that I could help others that were going through the same things I did ... because I realized there are so many exploited and abused women out there .... This lady at the Opus Dei, I remember, they [her employers] paid her 20 dollars a week; she was elderly .... These injustices really bother me.*

The number of cases of domestic abused workers that asked for help at *Casa* was on the rise, and according to E.C., around this time, in the year 2000, the women started discussing the idea of a bill to protect domestic workers’ rights. At this point, E.C. narrated that the staff members in charge of the women’s group were *Casa*’s lawyers,

who were also in charge of the legal processes.

The women worked with them to help disseminate information about the workers' rights through distributing pamphlets in places where domestic workers gather and in participating in rescue interventions, which meant going to domestic workers' houses and rescuing the worker who had no way of leaving the job place. In addition, the women also worked to provide support for these rescued workers by finding a place for them to stay, helping them find a new job and motivating them to join the group and help others. E.C. told the story of F.M., a Mexican woman who she helped "rescue" and who later joined the group:

*I met her at the McDonalds at Friendship heights, where they [domestic workers] all gather .... They [the people F.M. worked for] were ... Mexicans ... because she [F.M.] is also Mexican. But her employer, the lady [F.M. worked for], she was so arrogant when Casa's lawyer told her that he came to take F.M. with him and told her [the employer] to read the document explaining the case against her. She grabbed the paper, started reading and tears fell down her face .... She could not believe what was happening, ... and I told F.M. right there that I was very happy that she took this step .... Here [in the US], there are rights. You go against the law [and] you have to sit on the bench of the accused .... To this day, she [F.M.] stills works with the group at Casa.*

E.C. also referred to the cases where she was not successful in supporting and helping workers. A number of women she tried to help and recommended to *Casa* deceived her. Others benefitted from *Casa's* help and then left; and others fabricated stories, and then, in the middle of the "rescuing" process, disappeared.

At the same time, the first attempt to build a cooperative started developing among the group's participants as a way to respond to the growing need to find jobs for the women who were rescued from abusive jobs. Under the leadership of M.E., the staff member *Casa* named for the project, the group built a cooperative to provide cleaning services to houses and offices. After attending training sessions, they started promoting the services.

The work was done in teams of three or four participants, depending on the size of the job. In some cases, one participant would provide her car for the group, or if this was not possible, the group would travel by bus. The income from the services charged was centralized and then distributed among the cooperative participants.

Unfortunately, the project did not last long. Individual interests, dishonesty and the lack of effective leadership were among the main reasons for the failure:

*... things were not done properly. Dishonest, they [some of the cooperative group members] wouldn't report money earned ... but afterwards, when everything is discovered, ... [they would say] 'Look, I can do a very good job [for you, the employer],' and then [they would] say, 'Look I can come next week, and I come on my own. And, you [can] pay me directly.' That is not professional because it [Casa] is an organization! Then, one of the clients called and said she was very disappointed because she was offered the service outside the organization. And then, the women in the group would call me to ask me to go and talk to Casa's staff, so they would not lose the cooperative. And, I didn't want to intervene anymore because they were putting themselves in the mud, and as the saying goes: 'He who does a poor job, ends up poor.'*

Among other things, this experience also led E.C. to disagree with the idea of building a new cooperative years later, in 2006, when the Committee of Women Seeking Justice was formed. Originally, the objective of the Committee was two-fold: to work on a bill to protect the rights of domestic workers and to build a cooperative as an alternative income earning source for the workers.

According to E.C.'s narrative, other members of the Committee also disagreed with the cooperative project. For many, the experience with the other project had shown them, according to E.C., that forming a cooperative is a complex endeavor that requires much training, leadership and resources, and therefore, this project required people who could dedicate time to its development, particularly in the initial phases:

*For example, right now I work 5 days a week, so I would not have enough time to dedicate to a project of that kind, ... and many of the*

*women work like me, ... many people who have kids and family.  
Even those who are single [find it hard to find the time to commit]  
.... They [both married and single involved also] need to send  
money home and cannot depend on an income that is not stable ....*

E.C. stated that the project of the bill quickly obtained much more consensus among the regular participants, and that was why the idea of the cooperative faded away shortly after the Committee started meeting and working regularly. E.C. worked hard with the group to draft the bill and lobby organizations and council members, and she expressed that there is still so much more to do:

*This is the story of my life, real lived experiences that made me who I am .... People see me now, and they cannot imagine how much I had to work my fingers to the bones to get where I am .... But, I did things the way I wanted, legally. I could have hired a coyote<sup>29</sup> to get here ... [it would have been] much easier back then .... I worked like a slave to get here [and to stay here and be treated fairly] .... How many E.C.s are there out there? Everything I am learning, compiling [for later use]. I won't leave [the US] like this because some day I am going to my country, and I want to be the voice of the people who work as domestics [in Nicaragua] ....*

### **Preliminary Comments**

Referring to her activism, E.C. emphasized that the main problem currently, both in Nicaragua and here, is the lack of awareness of rights. She felt that, most importantly, the task is to provide information to the people who might be suffering abuse. Nonetheless, when she referred to the women being exploited in Nicaragua, she talked about fear of placing a legal demand, even fear of demanding that the law be observed. When she referred to the US, she insisted that workers needed information, and that the main task was thus to provide information to make it accessible to those who might be suffering

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<sup>29</sup> Coyote refers to migrant smugglers who charge a fee to help them cross the border. It is used generally to refer to the US/Mexico border.

from abusive conditions. But, still the question remained, “How do they overcome their fear once in the US?”

A number of processes had to become integrated into E.C.’s life in order for her to move from being the victim to being the one who helped others. To begin, she was successful escaping the situation of abuse she lived and then managed to move to a job with better conditions. After that, she became conscious of belonging to a group of workers who were systematically abused, and the problem became larger than herself. Collectively, the group had to acknowledge they were subject to rights, and that these were observed in the US, that there was help out there. Once she was successfully helped, she could move on to help others.

## Chapter 6

H.L.

*Though I came here [to the US] complying with all laws, one always suffers in this country – so I stopped listening/hearing; I stopped seeing; I stopped speaking – nothing .... Depression gets hold of you, closes up on you, and it hurts the stomach .... People look at you, but you can't see them; depression is horrible (2009).*

### Background: Recent History

#### Honduras



Honduras occupies a strategic location in Central America, bordering Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Honduras, unlike its neighborhoods, has not experienced a civil war; however, inter-group tensions have always existed within the country. As a result, violence has erupted on different occasions, causing chaos and civilian deaths. Yet, constitutional crisis throughout the 1940s and 1950s led to reforms that allowed workers to organize and build local grassroots organizations that are still active today. In fact,

Honduras is recognized for its long tradition of supporting grass roots groups that range from neighborhood anti-crime associations to labor unions.

In 1969, the relationship between Honduras and El Salvador deteriorated and border tensions reached a critical point when, on March 14, the Salvadoran army launched an attack on the Honduras army. The armed confrontation known as the Soccer war was caused by political conflicts concerning immigration from El Salvador to Honduras. After four days of confrontation, a cease-fire was negotiated by the Organization of American States and Salvadorian troops withdrew from Honduran soil. The military conflict was short in duration, but it took more than a decade to arrive at a final peace settlement. As a result of the four day conflict, Honduras lost 100 combat troops, and over 2,000 civilians were killed. Additionally, thousands more were lost or became homeless (Kugler, 2006).

Following the conflict, from 1975 to 1982, Honduras was under several military governments. Corruption scandals were not uncommon, and the country made very limited economic progress. In 1982, a new constitution was approved, and the country returned to a civilian rule. Although the political change brought reforms, the majority of the population still remained in extreme poverty with half of peasant families having no ownership of the land (Komisar, 1983).

Following years of inadequate political reforms, which attempted to assist Honduras' poorest citizens, in October 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras, leaving more than 5,000 people dead and 1.5 million displaced. The country's damages totaled nearly \$3 billion (Mullin, 1998).

Today, Honduras is experiencing high levels of poverty, with nearly 66% of the population living in some form of poverty and about 45% living in extreme poverty. This

economic reality combined with extreme inequalities has limited the capacity of regular citizens to improve their lives and have upward mobility within society (Ronderos, 2010). Unemployment in Honduras is high; wages are low; and social programs are inefficient and, in most part, not funded. These conditions have contributed to the increased migration of Hondurans to the United States. In 2005, it was estimated that more than 450,000 Hondurans were living in the US (American Community Survey), up from 116,000 in 1990 (US Census Bureau; Sladkov, 2007)

### **Meeting H.L.**

H.L. was also part of the founding Committee, and she caught my attention from the start, being older than most participants and, as such, having a noticeable long, white braid to complement her big eyes and well-defined features. I was attending the Committees' training sessions where I observed her willingness to contribute her experiences to the group.

### **Early Childhood: A Life of School and Domestic Work**

H.L. was born and grew up in a remote, rural area in the municipality of Francisco Morazán in Honduras. From her parents' house, she had to walk for two hours to get to the nearest neighbour's house. She attended a few years of elementary school thanks to the democratically elected government of Ramon Villeda, which took place between long periods of military dictatorships and which created and expanded the public education system. However, in 1963, shortly before elections would take place, a military coup

deposed Villeda.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, access to school was restricted, and H.L. was no longer allowed to attend. She described herself as a peasant and the eldest of nine children, who worked the land with her father and helped her mother in the house.

### **Adolescence: Abandonment**

H.L. recounted her sad story as a young teenager. When she was fifteen years old, she fell in love with the neighbour who was seventeen at the time, with whom she used to go to school. Once they lost access to school, it was very hard to meet and see each other, given the distances between the houses and the social restrictions imposed upon them. They were very much in love, H.L. related, and decided they wanted to get married and consulted their parents about their desire. Although they went through all the formalities and the boy's family went to talk to her family, H.L.'s father refused to let H.L. marry and banished her far from her home, taking her to live with an aunt in the city of La Paz:

*He was seventeen years old; we were very young. We were willing to stay at home and continue to be raised by our parents ... because we thought both our parents would be willing to keep supporting our upbringing .... What do you think? .... but then, his family came to ask my family permission to for me to marry him, ... and they [my family] opposed it .... They were so determined to not let me marry him that they decided to send me away and keep from him [my boyfriend] where I was going, so I wouldn't run away with him .... Only the two of them, my parents, opposed the marriage because my grandmother and the others were not against it ....*

H.L. recalled the story with tears in her eyes. She told me that once the boyfriend's family left, her father beat her so hard she thought she was going to faint. That same night, they left the house and started walking, first to borrow money from a family friend for the trip and then to drop H.L. at the aunt's house, in the area of Ciudad La Paz. It took

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<sup>30</sup> For more information see <<http://www.coha.org/ramon-villeda-morales-the-little-bird-who-brought-big-changes-and-honor-to-honduras/>>.

them four days and nights to get to their destination, riding in buses, mules and walking.

H.L. fell sick and almost died:

*... and I felt so sick ... my head ... it was burning, ... and I kept thinking ... 'Why didn't I die?' It would have been better to die ... because on top of this horrible trip, they dumped me in this place where I had never been. I was never raised there.*

The years that followed were very hard. The boyfriend found out where she was and went to visit her to try to convince her to run away with him, but H.L. refused.

Although she was in love and wanted to marry him, she was not willing to break the social rules and run away with him. She was not willing to defy family and social approval. He became very upset, left and planned to kidnap her with the help of some of his relatives. Eventually, he managed to take her away from the aunt's house and rape her, but H.L. escaped and was taken by her aunt to the police. But, she never admitted what had happened, as she would have been forced her to marry him if her family knew the truth, and H.L. never accepted him back into her life.

Although H.L. does not conceive of a life without work, moving from her parents' house, where she grew up and worked for her family, to the aunt's house, where she worked for others, was a painful experience and involved a lot of suffering. Even when she was asked to perform housework, just like at her parents' home, it was a different world, unknown to her and without the familiar environment and affection:

*... but I had to keep working like a donkey, with no pay, just to help them. And, they always complained that the work was not well done; every day they would complain, ... and they were right because when one goes from the mountains to the city, what does one know? How can one imagine what has to be done in a house when one moves from a ranch to a house? When night fell, every day I wanted to cry .... I was hungry, and they would limit my food; I was not used to this .... In the mountains, whatever we had, I would eat as much as I wanted ....*

After the kidnapping, she was taken back to the aunt's house by her father, who had been called by the police when H.L. was kidnapped. She described being brought back to the aunt's as a process "...to keep on suffering."

Eventually, after a few years, her aunt sent her to help one of her daughters, a cousin of H.L.'s, who had a small store and needed somebody to work for her. Again, H.L. referred to the hard work and no pay, her only source of payment for all the hard work she was expected to do being food.

### **Motherhood**

H.L. got married to a family's friend who was rather older than her, who she said she never really loved, but she decided to get married because she was afraid she was going to be alone working for others for the rest of her life. She had eight children, three girls and five boys, and then, at age 33, H.L. became a widow and was left to raise her children -- alone.

Once married, she was forced to work even more. She described her husband as a "good" man but very lazy with no ambition. She had to take care of the house and children and find activities that would generate some money. For years, she said, she prepared "nixtamal," which is the dough used to make tortillas, and she also prepared and sold food for the local school teachers. With time, H.L. organized a small store in her house, where she sold basic groceries, vegetables and bread.

Towards the end of the 1970s, after ruling for almost two decades, the military decided to start transferring power to civilians and eventually called for elections in 1981.

The traditional parties, the Liberals and the Nationals, started early organization efforts to successfully compete in the elections.

H.L. shared her experience as a political activist during these years. Her husband's family had worked traditionally for the Liberal Party before the period of the military dictatorship. Roberto Suazo was the liberal candidate for the presidential elections, and when the campaign reached the community level, her husband became very active in the party. H.L. was almost forced to participate, according to her narrative:

*At first, I refused to participate .... I told them I had no training for this, that I had been trained to be a mother and take care of my children, which was not my choice either. It [motherhood] was imposed on me; ever since I was a child I was doing this work, ... but they insisted .... 'There must be change for everybody.... You can contribute more than your husband .... Let's take the kids; let's sign them up'.... We lived in a very small ranch, ... so finally, they convinced me .... and there I go with all my very young children ....*

The party leader was a woman called Gloria Jalil, and she was the one who convinced H.L. to work for the party, emphasizing the importance of women's participation. She pointed out that Gloria was married to a Turkish man, a prominent business man called Alfredo Jalil, but that "...she [Gloria] was an 'Indian' from my same locality in Tegucigalpa."

H.L. and her husband became very active working for the party. While her husband met with the leaders when they were in town to discuss and plan for the elections, she would cook and prepare meals to host the political committees in her home. In the process, she got more involved and was often asked to join the meetings and give speeches to the community. She described how her political participation evolved:

*The party people would arrive all dressed up in suits .... They would come to my own house ... politicians, lawyers .... I would wait for them at my small ranch .... They would let me know, and we led meetings at our house. My husband was the one that worked with them, one by one, to see documents for elections. I felt my time had*

*come to participate, and they would come and ask me to give speeches to the people and often we would go to other towns nearby. We had our petitions .... We wanted to fix our school; the roof had collapsed, and it had no fences .... We also wanted to fix the middle school; we started working on it.*

Sometime around 1990, H.L.'s elder husband passed away, and she was left with her sons and daughters. By that time, the oldest was 19 years old, and the youngest was 5 years old. She recalled yet another activity she performed to earn an income to keep up with the children's expenses. When her husband fell ill, she contacted the party people they had worked for, who were now in power, to help her keep the local postal service agency her husband had obtained as compensation for his dedication/work for the party. It took her a major effort to convince the public officials to assign it to her, but she got it. Then, in addition to the children, the household and the store, H.L. was in charge of delivering the local mail and insuring that other, more remote villages got their mail delivered regularly. Finally, she managed to raise her children and made sure they all had the opportunity to attend school and some even college.

During this period, H.L.'s emotional life was intensified as her boyfriend from her adolescent years contacted her again and tried to convince her to move to the US with him, where he was currently living. Though she recalled people around her insisted she should accept his offer and move with him, she refused to come to the US undocumented and decided to "move on." She established another relationship, which she described as a "love one." They were very much in love, but although her sons and daughters were young adults already, they were jealous and opposed the relationship. They stayed together for a few years, until her son convinced her to come to the US. He had married an American girl and moved to the Washington DC area.

## Migration

While attending college, her eldest son met an American student, and they got married. Once her new daughter-in-law was done with her studies in Tegucigalpa, she had to move back to the US, and H.L.'s son decided to migrate to the US, where they could both finish their studies. When their child was born, they convinced H.L. to move to the US and help them take care of the child. H.L. finally agreed as she felt her children were all grown, and she was lonely, "...the day had come that I had nobody but God." Her son, who had obtained citizenship through his wife, sponsored H.L., so she could obtain a residency permit.

H.L.'s encounter with her new life was harsh. Her son had advised her not to work outside the home, as, he would say, "Work here [in the US] is much harder." Nonetheless, working at her son's home, taking care of her granddaughter, turned out to be very hard as well:

*Though I came here [to the US] complying with all laws, one always suffers in this country – so I stopped listening/hearing; I stopped seeing; I stopped speaking -- nothing. They wouldn't let me watch TV or listen to the radio either; they did not let me be the way I am, and depression hit me hard. I don't know why they were so mean to me. Depression gets hold of you, closes up on you, and it hurts the stomach .... People look at you, but you can't see them; depression is horrible.*

Her first stay in the US lasted two years. After these two years, her daughter-in-law was working for the US government and was, ironically, sent to Tegucigalpa to work for two years. After going through a harsh period in the US, H.L. had to return to Honduras only to find herself depressed there as well. Her son was rebuilding her long-term home, her small ranch, and she had to live with them in the capital. When the time came for the son and wife to go back to the US, H.L. recalled that she decided she wanted to come

back with them. She felt she had nothing to do back in her home in Honduras, no more business, post office agency or children to take care of. Also, she had started attending a women's leadership course at *Casa* in Maryland, before coming back to Tegucigalpa, which had helped her feel better, and she was motivated to return to this training. This time around, her son and his wife did not want to bring her back, but eventually she managed to persuade them that it would be better for her.

It was not until she came back to the US after spending two years in Honduras that H.L. started searching and finding a way towards independence. At first, she had to live with her son and help out, and she was only paid \$400 dollars a month. Also, her son would not pay her taxes or her social security. H.L. decided that she wanted to live on her own and pay her own bills, so she began job hunting.

During the first years after her return, H.L. changed jobs in search of better work conditions and a stable job opportunity and always managed to maintain employment. She started working at an industrial laundry business and then at a beauty salon, while also dedicated to the Cleaning Services Cooperative organized by *Casa*, which lasted for approximately two years.

For the past five years, H.L. has worked for two cleaning services companies dedicated to offices. She complained about the split schedule because it is very tiring for her, but she was pleased she was contributing to her social security because she wants to retire one day. Also, she joined the workers' union at the office cleaning company she works for, and has become an active member:

*My idea is that I have to put up with this work for the time required to get a pension. It is not that I don't like it, but with so many years on my back, I cannot work so much any longer .... I vacuum, remove garbage, [and] clean bathrooms, standing for long hours in the*

*morning and then again in the evening. I finish up every day at 10:30 pm.*

## **Reconfiguring Activism in the United States: Networking & The Way to Casa in Search of Help**

After the first few months in the US working for her son, H.L. managed to get him to sign her up for English classes. She would take care of her granddaughter all day and attend school at night. She started attending classes at a school close to where she lived:

*When my daughter-in-law came home from work, I would go to my English classes, three hours a day. But I knew zero English when I started going. I could only listen; there was something in my head that would not let me learn. I could only count to ten in English.*

While attending the school, H.L. established contact with another Latina woman, A.G., who approached her to tell her about English classes offered at *Casa*, where the teacher also spoke Spanish. H.L. would be able to communicate better with this teacher when she had questions. Also, Ana herself was starting a leadership course for women at *Casa* and invited her to attend.

H.L. started attending *Casa's* English courses and joined the leadership course. Though she said that often her family would not let her go and would give her a hard time, she managed to attend most meetings.

It turned out that the leadership course was life changing for H.L. as it helped her climb out of her depression and motivated her to eventually seek independence.

*The leadership classes were very helpful to me. They kept assigning me more responsibilities in the group because they knew I was learning. I think it helped the women so much .... From the domestic workers in this group, a leader was born. She arrived at Casa crying one day, and the classes and the group helped her so much that she became a leader herself.*

Coming back from Honduras, she immediately went back to *Casa* and joined the recently created *Mujeres al Poder* (Women to Power) which later became *Mujeres Unidas* (Women United), an initiative that derived from the leadership group and the employment program, and, according to H.L., from the Health Promoters program as well. It had the objective of building a cooperative as an alternative means of generating income for the low-income immigrants that arrived at *Casa* in search of work.

Under the leadership of *Casa*, which was in charge of providing support and training the members of the cooperative, the group of ten women started operating a cooperative that offered cleaning services. H.L. was named the treasurer, and she pointed out that only the president and herself were documented in the group.

According to H.L., the business worked, and all the women involved had good jobs. Money started flowing, but after two years, H.L. decided to resign as she realized there was mismanagement. The woman in charge of the day-to-day operations was mishandling the finances, with the support of a few other members, and the group started disintegrating. Corruption by some of the members of the cooperative was undermining the activists' efforts to build a business of their own. H.L. described the woman in charge of the day-to-day operations as "very powerful," and none of the participants dared denounce her:

*The idea was that we were all going to work equal, that we would all know what the others were doing, and nobody would hide anything .... but supposedly this woman, J.C., was the most intelligent of all. She knew a lot about computers, so she started doing things behind the backs of the others, many things .... She was very happy because she was powerful; she was in charge of everything, ... but because of her, everybody left .... Nobody wanted to denounce her. We were all scared, even me, because I was the treasurer, and I could see there was mismanagement. But, I was scared that she could even set me up, accuse me of mishandling the*

*money .... I thought, 'For money anybody kills.' .... The five women who were under my leadership all left with me.*

From H.L.'s account, it is not clear what happened to the cooperative after most of them left. *Casa's* leaders apparently kept supporting the woman in charge for a while, but both the woman in charge and *Casa's* staff eventually left *Casa* and some say they carried on the business.

### **From Being Helped to Helping: Working for Collective Rights**

H.L. recalled that *Casa*, once again, started reaching out to the women who had been involved in its different groups, and, under the leadership of first D.P. and then A.S., a number of women started gathering again, with the objective of working for the protection of the women and developing once again a cooperative to offer an alternative form of income:

*That is how the group that later formed the Committee started ... the project to enhance women's values and protect them because women kept coming to Casa complaining that they were abused or worked for a long time and did not get paid .... Then, they [the Committee] would 'tackle' the women and organize them into a group. 'Here you are going to get help. We are going to organize a march to get you out of where you are suffering abuse,' we would tell them. I collaborated by talking to them, participating in the meetings, distributing flyers, and in the rescue groups to get them [the domestic workers who were being abused] out of the houses when the employers would not let them go or when the women were scared.*

Once the Committee was in full operation, the group started discussing the idea of drafting a bill to protect domestic workers' rights. H.L. worked actively in the process of drafting and lobbying for the bill, and again, she was named treasurer of the Committee. She showed me a photo of the Committee in the newspaper, where she stood next to

some of the long term members on the day they celebrated the bill's approval. She was very proud of her accomplishments:

*I invited all my friends at work to come to the party to celebrate the approval of the bill with us. Then, I showed them the picture in the newspaper; they could not believe it .... They were astonished to see me in the papers ....*

Currently, H.L. still attends the meetings at *Casa* but felt the group has lost “strength” and was not as vital as it was under the leadership of A.D.S. However, H.L., when requested, still collaborates, distributes flyers, goes to marches, and tries to push the group to organize events that draw women to participate and to raise money. She has also joined the union at her work, attending meetings and volunteering. H.L. believes that only in working together, in an organized fashion, can people be heard and accomplish their objectives:

*This way, organized in groups, we can go in and see the bosses, the powerful people. If I go by myself, they won't let me in. I really like to participate in organizations that fight for the people. I don't know why. I think it is my consciousness that is like this. I believe that if you want to receive, you have to give. You don't have to give a lot of money; you can give time, work, service. For instance, I could have said I am not going to meet with Marcia because I have to wash this and that or because I am ashamed of my poor little room .... Everybody lives as they can; I am not ashamed of how I am.*

H.L. was always busy. Although we met on weekends, I always took her to some activity after our interview. She complained about her current jobs because she gets very tired, but she was happy to be independent and building up her pension for the future:

*I love my freedom. I don't want to depend on anybody or be told what to do.*

### **Preliminary Comments**

H.L. went through a two-step migration process – first with her encounter with another world, when she moved from her remote home to a town in the city, where

everything was different and then later to the US. For many years, her work life was determined by others until she moved back to the US for a second time, on her own, and decided to find a job away from her son. At this point, her work and her activism come together.

Joining *Casa* meant for H.L. that she could carve her way towards independence. She spent her whole life following other people's orders – her father, family, relatives, then her husband and finally her own son. She realized she could find a job on her own, earn money away from the family, pay her own bills and make her own decisions. Then, she was ready to help others follow the same path.

## Chapter 7

### H.S.

*They come from rural areas, and that is how they are freed from their parents, who often mistreat them, even sexually abuse [them]. They suffer, .... so when they get here, they think they have escaped the abuse but find another type of abuse here. They prefer this abuse because at least they get paid something, and they can decide what they do with their lives. They are not used to love and affection (2010).*

### Background: Recent History



Peru is geographically segmented by the Amazon in the east, the Andeans in the center, and the desert in the Pacific coast. This geographic topography has also historically defined political, economic and ethnic divisions, with most of the power concentrated along the coast.

For the most part, Peru, in contemporary history, has endured periods of political unrest and financial turmoil. Between 1968 and 1980, Peru was governed by military regimes that although authoritarian and repressive did not inflict the level of violence as

regimes did in neighboring countries. In 1980, after 12 years of a military government, Peru had its first democratic elections, and the Shining Path, an insurgent group, used this opportunity as a platform to start its violent attacks.

The Shining Path sought the elimination of the bourgeois democracy and society. To achieve its goal, this rebel group launched bloody attacks against the state and the general civilian population. The Peruvian government considered this group a terrorist organization and engaged in a counter insurgent military action that was mainly fought in the Peruvian highlands between 1980 and 1990. The war between the Shining Path and the counter-insurgency forces resulted in one of the most violent conflicts in Latin America, causing an estimate of 70,000 deaths as well as a large segment of “disappeared” people. The war instigated internal migration and displacement as people sought to flee both the terrorists and the military. The Shining Path leader was captured in the early 1990s, and since then, the organization continues to be active. But, its presence has become scarce within the country (Boesten, 2010).

Because of the war, the last three decades have been particularly difficult for the Peruvian people; however, in addition to the internal armed conflict that caused a chaotic economic and political situation, levels of corruption and impunity have scored particularly high among the last two administrations. These conditions paved the way for a massive migration to the United States, Spain and Japan since the 1990s. In 2006, the US Census Bureau reported more than 430,000 Peruvians residing in the US (Durand, 2010).

## **Meeting H.S.**

By the time I started interviewing H.S., I had already been familiar with her influence in the Committee as I heard her name mentioned several times during the leadership classes. Throughout the time I volunteered for the Committee, H.S. was quite engaged and central to the group's operation, and during the year that the law for domestic workers' rights was passed, she was the president of the Committee. While lobbying for the bill, H.S. spoke as the representative of the group, arguing for the need to protect domestic workers and summarizing the main contents of the proposed bill. I observed she felt quite comfortable speaking in public and sounded self-confident.

Personally, my contact with H.S. during these years was scarce, not much beyond socializing before or after the meetings. I knew nothing about her life, but I noticed some of the other women felt she was "different." I was curious to talk to her and learn more about this small, gentle woman who presided over the Committee during such a crucial period.

## **Early Childhood**

H.S. was born in Lima, Peru. She described a hard childhood as her father passed away when she was only two years old. As a result, her mother had to raise her and her sister by herself, offering room and board for students in their home in order to survive. When H.S. started attending secondary school, her mother passed away, and she and her sister had to leave school to take care of the small business of tending to students in order to earn a living.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Equivalent to middle and high school.

*I was born in Lima, but my parents were from Trujillo .... when my mother died, we had to work, to take care of the 'pension,' so we could have money to live. After I got married, ... I never worked; my work was always as a volunteer – I worked with scouts, with the church, in my community, organizing wherever required.*

## **Young Adulthood**

H.S. got married when she was seventeen and, after that, never had a paid job or occupation. Her husband also came from a very poor background. He too did not have the opportunity to study because he had to work:

*In his case, he had a difficult, very poor childhood and youth. He did not have a father. He was the one who had to be in charge and provide for the family and his brothers, support his mother. That is why also Jorge, [as] he was called back then, was independent very early on, so we could get married when we were so young. He did not want to study, but he supported me to go back to school.*

H.S. was dedicated to her husband and four children and went back to school to finish her studies when her children were small. Though she managed to finish high school, she did not make it to the university. H.S. says she never had enough credits to be accepted. Also, at this point, her oldest son and daughter were about to start college and there was not enough money to pay for her studies as well.

*... that is why I was always dedicated to doing community work, always doing something in my daughters' school, helping a hundred percent .... also when I studied, I was always fundraising for [things like] windows for the building and other things that were needed .... I enjoyed doing these things.*

When two of her children were already in college, her husband lost his job, and they were left with no income. This was a turning point in her life. After searching for a job for a while, the family had no more resources to draw from and no family network either, so her husband decided to migrate North. H.S.'s husband had always economically supported his own brothers and sisters, and her only sister had migrated to Venezuela.

Fifteen years went by until H.S. and her husband managed to live together again.

However, there was no family reunion as, by that time, two of her daughters had migrated themselves to Switzerland, and the other daughter and son were married and stayed in Lima, Peru.

Later, her daughter who had stayed in Peru got a divorce and moved to the US with her own children, H.S.'s grandchildren. Presently, they live with H.S. and her husband. He has a stable job, and H.S. is dedicated to her work as an activist for domestic workers and for her church. She leads a comfortable life, travels to Peru every year to visit her son and visits her daughters in Switzerland whenever she can.

### **Work in the Country of Origin**

Aside from her early teenage years when she was forced to drop school and work because her mother had passed away, H.S. never had a paid job outside the household or generated any income after she got married:

*Once I got married I did not work anymore. Back then, when one got married, one could not work anymore. One had to be dedicated to the husband and children. That is the way it used to be.*

After her husband left for the US, the family went through hard, economic periods. Jorge, H.S.'s husband, did not have a stable job, and remittances varied accordingly. Even then, H.S. never considered working to generate income. Rather, she decided to take control of the household management and stretch the scarce resources to survive.

*As my husband Jorge was not there anymore, and he was the one who decided everything, I had to take the reigns of the household. I never called him to ask anything. I would hide problems, so he wouldn't worry. And, he wouldn't tell me when he had no work because if he had money he would send us [some]. My daughters always said that I was a magician, that the money would last so long in my hands ....*

H.S. also wanted to make sure to hide her hardships from the community that surrounded her. She was conscious that once the initial plan of uniting the family in the US within a year did not happen, she had to protect her family from the gossip:

*Because I would save money when he [my husband] sent me [some], I would change 10 dollars each time and buy things for 15 days, a month. [I would] pay schools, whatever was needed, It was like multiplying it [the money] because I never knocked on anybody's door because first thing they [my neighbors] would say was, 'Look, the husband left them, starving.' So, I would go to the market with a dime, but nobody would know.*

## **Migration**

*Well, my husband's name is Jorge, but when he became an American citizen, he changed it to George because all his life he dreamt about living here in the US. It was not a dream from one moment to the other. Since he was a kid, he watched American movies because he liked the atmosphere, the life of American people.*

When H.S.'s husband lost his job and found no opportunity in Lima, he decided he would come to the US, following his lifelong dream. The family's idea was that he would go first, and once established, the rest of the family would join him within a year's time. Reality turned out to be quite different:

*It was terrible; he left a day before mother's day in May 1983. We were saying, 'Well, a year apart and then everybody [will be] together.' We were thinking [that] in a year we will all be together here [in the US], but 84, 85 came and nothing ... no residency ... Nine years went by until he got his residency and could go to visit us in Lima. He missed all the events, the children's events, and then even my son got married, and he was not there.*

H.S. recalled the hardships of her husband's first years in the US. He found jobs, but mostly short term, during the day, at night, and after the initial help of the friends he had in Miami, he was left to fend for himself. He had used a tourist visa to enter the US, and in order to continue with his legal status, he got a student visa, which forced him to attend classes. After a while, he couldn't handle work and study and lost his visa.

*He had friends in Miami, but as we are in the US, everything comes to an end. You come one week; then another [comes], and then you are on your own. That's how it is here. But after two years, he realized he couldn't work and send money and study at the same time. And so, he decided to drop the studies and became undocumented. For five years, he lived with so much fear ....*

Jorge moved to the Washington DC area and settled. He managed to secure a more stable job and applied for his residency. After nine years abroad, he was finally given residency and could travel to Lima to see the family. Since then, he would travel to Lima to visit every year, but it took another six years for them to reunite and live together again. George, as H.S. called him, had to wait five years to become a citizen and then ask for H.S.'s residency. H.S. did not want to ask for her residency before George became a citizen because he was very scared that something could go wrong after all the years he spent in the US undocumented. Another year went by until she was granted her residency and could finally move here. H.S.'s husband had left Lima in 1983 and went back for the first time in 1992. During this period, her two older children, a son and daughter, were married, and the two younger ones, daughters, had moved to Switzerland. After fifteen years apart, in 1998, H.S. came alone to reunite with her husband. She described her arrival in the US, in Maryland, where she currently still lives:

*... and then I got here. My husband had rented a small house, with its little kitchen and bathroom, but thank god, it was independent. And, there I was, separated from my children in Peru because the younger ones had moved to Switzerland long before I moved here. I didn't understand the language; it was a tremendous shock .... The first thing my husband taught me was how to get to the post office to send letters to my children. To this day, I write letters to them every month, and they write me back. Every time I write or read [the letters] I cry ....*

## **Networking: The Way to Casa**

H.S. started acclimating and getting around her neighborhood quickly, and within a few days, she came across a flyer announcing leadership classes at *Casa de Maryland*:

*I went home quickly and told my husband I had to go to these classes [leadership classes] because also, on the other side of the flyer it announced catechizing classes<sup>32</sup> and that was exactly what I was dedicated to in Peru. George explained to me how to get there, and I found it the first time I tried.*

She could not join the leadership classes right away because she was told they were full, and she would have to wait for the next one. But, the staff at *Casa* invited her to go to *Casa* anyhow, so she could attend other activities such as the employment program for women and lectures for recently arrived immigrants, among others:

*The next day I went back and started attending the lectures, and since then, to this day, I have been attending Casa, taking courses, working as a volunteer and helping others overcome their problems.*

In the beginning, H.S. took leadership courses and then self-esteem courses. These classes, with A.G., started drawing women to *Casa*, and they became meridian points for awareness of the discrimination and exploitation they were subject to, often at home and at work.

## **Country of Residence: Activism**

Once *Casa* started providing legal advice and support, the group grew even faster.

*Then, we [the women at Casa] started thinking about getting ... [other] women together; more women would come, women with many problems. We would distribute flyers, and the women would come and tell us about their problems, complaints, like [completing] work ... [with] no pay ... [and] abuse by husbands. That's how it all started.*

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<sup>32</sup> Oral instruction in Christian doctrine.

H.S. recounted many successful stories of women who attended the courses and managed to overcome their hardships and build better lives for themselves and their families. She regretted that *Casa* stopped offering the courses, arguing that there were no funds to continue them. She reflected on how very helpful they had been to women and that *Casa* should go back to offering them at least once a year:

*... [From] cases of domestic violence and others, women would learn a lot and become strong to face their problems. From these courses, the self-esteem courses, we started thinking of the domestic workers' exploitation.*

Also, from these early meetings, H.S. recounted the sufferings of the women that contacted *Casa*. Mostly, they came from situations of abuse back home, both within the family and at work. They tried to escape this mistreatment by venturing all the way to the US, only to find themselves submitted to terrible conditions again:

*Horrible, Marcia! I wish it were only that they didn't get paid or paid enough .... The worst is that they are mistreated as persons; they are screamed at, pushed around, told that they are good for nothing and stupid, and some [employers] even raise their hands at them. And, if the employer's rage doesn't go away the whole day long, the woman is left with no food and has to go to the small 'hole' she is given as a 'room' to cry. You understand?*

H.S. was grateful to *Casa* because that is where she learned everything she knows about leadership, self esteem and even public speaking. She took courses for five years, and then she started helping the instructor. She would even help facilitate the course elsewhere, outside *Casa*. H.S. also emphasized often that people are not always grateful to *Casa*. Some get what they want and leave. They never come back to help others. Recently, she said, *Casa* decided to develop a membership system, so people could not take advantage of the services and then leave.

The idea of drafting a bill to protect domestic workers specifically came from M.E., who was *Casa's* staff member at the time, in charge of leading the incipient women's

group. It stemmed from the need to tend to a growing number of cases of abuse, and it was specifically the case of two Ecuadorian women who contacted *Casa* because their employers were abusing them that motivated the drafting of the bill and the campaign to pass it at the county level.

The women would get together to talk about their problems and to try to help each other. With M.E., the real “fight” started. At first, for the group, it was a process of acknowledging that domestic workers had rights. Although H.S herself never worked in domestic service, she identified with them, placing the struggle for domestic workers rights within the broader issue of women rights, particularly immigrant women’s rights:

*Little by little, we didn’t even know, we didn’t even imagine that we could have rights in cases of violence, domestic violence, salaries not paid. The thing is, one does not believe one has rights, particularly when you don’t have documents. Well, I always had documents, but I never said it. For me, we were all women, all equal, and the struggle was for women, for their rights.*

H.S. goes on to describe the development of the organization of the group. With the support of lawyers from *Casa*, the Committee started drafting a bill and developing a strategy to obtain support from other organizations and from Montgomery County constituents:

*It wasn’t easy Marcia. We had to work a lot. We had to get 3,000 signatures to show that there was a real need, that the women were victims of exploitation, so we could convince somebody to sponsor the bill. Thank God that back then there were a lot of women participating in the group.*

Both during the process of organizing and lobbying for the bill to protect domestic work, H.S. described many cases of “rescuing” women who were being abused. She participated in a number of rescues and followed the outcomes. Mostly, they were successful stories, and the exploited women managed to get at least part of their money

back and to find other jobs with fair salaries and better work conditions. H.S. complained that even though the number of cases had increased, given the budget cuts at *Casa*, they could only afford one lawyer for all the different cases that reached the organization. She described the situations in great depth, the struggles the women who were “rescued” had been subject to. Some were not paid at all; some were paid very little; and some were barely allowed to eat or go out. They are most often subject to a long, fifteen-hour day work schedule and were often deprived of their documents.

H.S. described the changes in the “rescued” women as very gratifying when she could see how much the women had personally evolved and were able to take the reigns of their own lives:

*..., so when they are rescued, they say, ‘No, I don’t want to work here. I want to be independent.’ You [Marcia] should see them. It is so different when women recover their freedom and overcome fear. They feel supported; they know what they want. The self-esteem helps a lot; that’s why I insist that these self-esteem courses are so important. They [these women who had previously been exploited and abused] start valuing themselves.*

### **International Activism**

The Committee of Women Seeking Justice joined national and international organizations of domestic workers, and the Committee’s representatives have attended some of their meetings. H.S. has been asked on different occasions, while president of the Committee and subsequently, to represent the group in such meetings. When we last met for an interview, H.S. was preparing for her trip to Geneva, to participate in the International Labor Organization (ILO) meeting in June 2010, where she was to discuss a proposed convention of and recommendations for decent work for domestic workers:

*I am going to attend as support to the delegation of the US, but with my own means [paying my own expenses] because I was going to Geneva anyway in July*

*to visit my daughters. So then, I just decided to go before [my visit with them], so I could attend this meeting.*

H.S. has been to different places, representing the Committee. She has gone with A.D.S to her home city of Lima, Peru, to attend a meeting of Latin American organizations of domestic workers, and recently, she went to the Dominican Republic:

*I went to the Dominican Republic to participate in workshops for domestic workers. We [representatives of the Committee of Women Seeking Justice from Casa that went to the workshops] were asked to prepare two topics, and I gave leadership and self-esteem [courses] to many women during 8 days. [While there,] We were invited [to join] ... an organization in DC called Solidarity Center. I went [to learn more] together with another woman who also belongs to a domestic worker organization in California. The last day, Saturday, we also worked with women from Haiti; they are terribly exploited.*

### **Envisioning the Way Ahead**

H.S. believed that, most importantly, she wanted to work towards building a Center for Domestic Workers, a place where they could stay when they are rescued and need to find a job, a place that offers training for the women and even a place where they can gather on Sundays. She also thought that dissemination and outreach were essential as the first challenge for the Committee was to find ways to reach out to the women to let them know they have rights and that the Committee could and would fight for them.

### **Preliminary Comments**

Indirectly, H.S. also migrated for economic reasons, like many other Latina women. However, although H.S. suffered family separation for a long period because her husband had to migrate for work, she never had to work back home or in the US; thus, she never suffered the same kind of exploitation as domestic workers she knew. But nonetheless, the process of acknowledging rights and moving from fighting for individual well-being

to fighting for the collective good is similar to that of the other women. Leadership courses for individual well-being linked to other women who she identified with, even when she had not gone through the same process as they had. Part of the rationale for this link was the similarities in ethnic identity and gender issues. Consequently, H.S. joined the fight for the bill that would benefit the group and not necessarily herself.

## Chapter 8

### G.P.

*My four sisters are all single mothers; only one of them got married, and it was [an] even worse [situation for her than for the rest of them who stayed single]. They all raise their children by themselves and work so hard. I didn't want this for myself .... I wanted to go away; I wanted to leave my country .... I dreamt of living in Italy, ... and I even saw myself holding a ticket in my hand. But, I could not see to where .... It was so difficult to come to this country ... (2010).*

### Background: Recent History

#### Ecuador



Ecuador is bounded on the north by Colombia, on the south and east by Peru and on the west by the Pacific Ocean. Nearly half of Ecuador's population is indigenous. This group that has been economically and socially marginalized for decades has played an important role in instilling political unrest and opposing civilian and military governments. This popular unrest has been motivated by government failures to deliver on promises of land reform, lower unemployment, and social services as well as continued socioeconomic inequalities (Aviles, 2009).

Ecuador's political history has been marked by turbulences, frequent coups, military dictatorships, recession and the ever-present tensions between elites and indigenous groups. Between 1997 and 2006, Ecuador experienced a period of political instability with three presidents being deposed under different circumstances. In addition, the country was on the verge of a serious recession.

Historically, Ecuador is a country with high social inequality and 62% of the population living under the poverty line. Palpable social and ethnic disparities in the distribution of wealth and food have set the conditions for persistent popular uprising and government volatility (Larrea & Farrow, 2005).

Between 1960 and 1997, Ecuador's political and economic distress precipitated waves of Ecuadorian migrants to the United States and Spain. By 2005, nearly 500,000 Ecuadorians lived in the United States, and about the same number in Spain, both documented and undocumented. These were by far the most important destinations for Ecuadorians. Italy, which ranks next, reported for the same year, around 60,000 residents who were nationals of Ecuador (Mejia, 2008).

### **Meeting G.P.**

Among the women I interviewed during, G.P. was the one with whom I was least acquainted. During the years I worked as a volunteer for the group, I saw her at the meetings often, but she seemed to always be in a hurry and mostly left right after the meetings were over. G.P. joined the women's group towards the end of 2004, shortly after she was rescued from the house of the diplomats who employed her and when the program was under M.E.'s leadership and was called *Mujeres Unidas* (Women United).

When I first contacted her and told her about my research project, she was very receptive, but she told me that she had to consult with her lawyer before accepting to participate. The legal process initiated against her former employers after she was “rescued” was not closed yet, and the lawyer wanted to make sure that whatever I was doing, it was not going to interfere with that process. However, once I talked to him directly, he was actually pleased that I was working on the histories of these women, and I was given the clearance I needed to start interviewing G.P.

G.P. invited me to her work place, and most interviews were conducted while she watched the children she currently cares for as well as her own one and a half year old daughter, who she brings every day with her to work. Sometimes, we would also make use of quiet times she had to talk when she drove to pick up the children from various activities.

### **Early Childhood**

G.P. was born close to Esmeraldas, Ecuador, a Pacific, coastal city with an approximate population of 200,000. G.P. described her home town:

*Esmeraldas is a very poor town, a very poor region. We lived outside the city, in the countryside, in a village. We are peasants. My dad cultivated corn, beans, [and] manioc root for our own consumption. He still lives there.*

G.P. is the third of two brothers and five sisters. They all have left home and live either in Quito, the Capital of Ecuador, or in Guayaquil, the second largest city, except for one brother who stayed home with their father.

Aside from working at home and helping out in the fields, since she was in her early teens, G.P. was sent to Esmeraldas to work as a domestic in a house:

*I migrated to Esmeraldas at the age of twelve [or] thirteen, alone, to*

*work, to work at a house. There one is taught to be respectful to the master, that he is always right, these kind of things. My parents packed me with my things and sent me; there was no option, and nobody asked me. This family, the husband, he had a truck and was friends with my father, so when they said they needed somebody to help in the house, I was sent to their house.*

## **Young Adulthood**

G.P. worked in two different houses for about four years, earning very little money and sending most of it home to support her parents. She then moved to Quito, where her older sister already lived. She worked as a domestic live-in worker for many years, until she managed to rent a room and gain some independence:

During the 1990s, when migration outflows from Ecuador to Europe and the US reached a historical high, G.P. was part of those who dreamt of migrating. She finally found her way to the US through a family of diplomats and came to the Washington DC area.

After being severely abused by her employers, she managed to find her way to *Casa*, to get help and eventually to join the women's group. G.P. then married Jose, who she met at the school where she went to learn English, and they had a baby girl. She still dreamt, however, of opening a business and building a house in Ecuador, to eventually move back home. She also planned to take courses to become a massage therapist.

## **Work in the Country of Origin**

G.P.'s first paid job was with a family in Esmeraldas. She received a meager salary that barely allowed her to take some money to her parents. Her memories related to learning to be submissive and feeling very lonely:

*I helped my parents with the little they [my employers] gave me, but I hardly got to see them [my parents] ... because it took hours to get*

*home and come back. And, I had to work all the time; I only had permission to leave for a few hours on Sundays. I felt so lonely. I was so young. I cried so much at night .... We pretended everything was fine, but as kids, we suffered .... I felt fear ... when one of them raised their voice at me .... I was so scared ....*

After a couple of years, G.P. managed to move to a better job, still at Esmeraldas, working for a lady that allowed her to go to school. She would work during the day and go to school at night. Three years went by, and G.P. finally decided to move to Quito, where her older sister was already living. She had to borrow money for the trip, but once in Quito, she found a live-in job that paid five thousand *suces*, which for her was a lot of money, though it was the equivalent in the US to ten dollars at the time.<sup>33</sup> She changed jobs a couple of times in Quito but always as a live-in domestic worker:

*I worked all day every day except Sundays. In general, I was not mistreated. I was the maid, wore a uniform, did my work, [and had] long [work] journeys. But, I didn't know any different. It was normal for me. They [my employers] had their parties. I'd work late into the night. They never gave any extra money. I had no idea that such a thing existed, extra-salary, overtime pay ....*

Once her third sister came to Quito, they decided they wanted to rent a room and become independent. But, back then, G.P. had no idea what it meant to be independent, pay for food, utilities, transportation, etc. G.P. and her sisters had to face some precarious times:

*I found a school I could attend at night and met somebody I liked at school. It was third grade. Then, I decided I wanted to live by myself. I wanted to be independent, be able to handle my money, but I was so ignorant and naïve, that at the same time, the only thing I thought of was the room. I knew I had to pay rent, but ... I never thought of food [or] even a bed. We slept in newspapers for a long while and ate bread and bananas.*

For a while, G.P. managed to work and study and to barely subsist with the meager

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<sup>33</sup> Approximate exchange rate U.S. 1 dollar = Ecuador su 520 (1988).

salary she earned. The sisters helped each other, and if one was unemployed, the others would pay for the basics. She changed jobs many times, trying to cope with work, study and paying the bills:

*I studied, got another job, and from then on, I hopped from one job to the other, always searching for better pay. So, I could make ends meet.*

Eventually, G.P. landed in a better job, working for a privileged group of Colombian bachelors that shared a house. She has good memories of these years. They treated her well, and as the only woman in the house, she was in charge of all the housekeeping. Meanwhile, G.P. and her sisters moved to a small, pre-fabricated house, located on a property that belonged to her bosses. They let her live there, while taking care of the property, at least until they decided to sell it.

G.P. and her family lived in this house for about five years. During this time, the extended family grew considerably. Her other two younger sisters moved in, and a cousin that came to Quito to study also joined the household. Three of her brother's children, whose wife had passed away, also came to live and study in Quito, and two of her sisters had babies.

Although G.P. was not the eldest, she became, de facto, the head of the extended household. She was the "owner" of the house, and she made sure bills were paid and that there was food for everybody. She also opened up a savings account for the family, so they all contributed. The idea was they would use the savings for a down payment on a house. Unfortunately, G.P. said, this never happened:

*My brother got married in Esmeraldas, back home, very young .... And, his wife fell sick with cancer when she was only 28 years old. Then, my sister also got very sick. She was in the hospital for a long time. It turned out she had malaria .... Well, we had to use up all our savings to help out.*

The extended family had to face yet another challenge. After living in this house for almost five years, they were told they had to leave. For different reasons, the owners, who were also her bosses, were not able to give G.P. and her family advanced notice, and the family went through a period of total instability:

*We were so many living in this house, but there was space, upstairs, downstairs. We always managed. And well, from one day to the other, we had to leave the place .... They [my employers] sold the place. We went searching elsewhere, our belongings spread all over, here, there, in friends' houses. We would sleep one day at a cousin's house, the other at another's. We were a lot of people, and there [in Quito] people don't want to rent to a lot of people. Finally we found a house.*

After quitting the job with the Colombian bachelors, G.P. went to work for a lady that had a daycare. Though originally she was replacing somebody temporarily, it turned out that the lady and her husband liked G.P.'s work, and so G.P. stayed. The husband was a physio-therapist, and G.P. would clean his office in addition to her work with the daycare. Getting up early and adding other small jobs here and there, G.P. managed to make enough to pay her bills and send money to her parents. Nonetheless, all the while, G.P. was dreaming of going away from her country, living elsewhere, in search of an income that would allow her a better life.

### **Going North...**

By the late 1990s, the outflows of Ecuadorians to Europe and the US was increasing steadily (Mejia, 2008). G.P. wanted to be part of the thousands that were leaving the country in search for better economic opportunities. She recalled her premonitory dreams:

*One of my dreams was to come here, leave my country. I knew I had to leave. I wanted to go to Europe, Italy. I dreamt of myself*

*travelling, but I could never see where to. Once I saw myself under a bridge and then begging for money in Italy ... what a nightmare .... I woke very anxious, rethinking if that was really what I wanted to do. Then, ... [one] time, I dreamt I was travelling, and I could see where I was going. It [my dream] said USA, ... so I thought, 'That is where I have to go' .... But, it was so difficult to come here.*

G.P. talked often to her employer about her dreams of leaving the country. After a couple of years working with this family, the opportunity emerged. The employer's sister was a diplomat and was being sent to the US to work at the embassy. She was looking for somebody to go with her to the US as a domestic worker. G.P.'s employer got her an interview with her sister, and it went well. The agreement was that she would work with the new employer in Ecuador for a trial period, and if it worked well for both of them, G.P. would go with her to Washington DC:

*They were very long work journeys, cleaning, cooking, taking care of the children and preparing for the move, the visa and all these things. I don't like to talk much about this period. The kids became very close to me; there were two kids .... Well, they [the diplomats] decided to bring me, and we all thought things would be different here [in the US], would be better than there [in Ecuador], with these endless work days and so much to do ....*

As to the documentation process, G.P. related that everything was hurried. They took her to the embassy for her visa, and then, G.P.'s employers withheld her passport from her. Additionally, prior to getting her visa, G.P. was given a contract to sign and barely had time to read it. She still recalled that it read she was going to be paid six dollars an hour, and she would work forty hours a week, from Monday to Friday:

*I had to read it very quickly, on our way to the embassy, and sign it right away. They [my employers] would barely let me read it. I thought that was my salary, what it said there. I had no idea. I thought everything was normal. I didn't ask questions ... till I got here, and they told me my monthly salary was 300 dollars. And, I was going to work from Monday to Saturday.*

## Work in the Country of Residence

G.P. told me the problems started right away. She arrived in the Washington DC Metropolitan area on July 11, 2002, and immediately, she started working all day and had to do all the house-work the way it was done “in our country”:

*I had to clean, take care of the kids [and] cook. You know how we cook a lot of food in our country, soup, rice, the main dish, so much food, and everything else. And on top of it, there is no work schedule; you [meaning G.P.] have to get up at a certain time to make breakfast and send the kids to school, but then there is no time to finish, to go to bed. Or you finish your work, and you cannot go out. You have to ask permission, and immediately, they [my employers] want to know where you are going, what you are going to do ....*

With time, the abusive relationship got worse. Upon arrival, they had taken away her passport, arguing that they had to show it at the Ecuadorian Embassy to demonstrate that she had entered the US, and even when she asked for it back, they always came up with excuses. Then, she told them she wanted to get an ID card, so she had identification when she went out. They never provided her the documentation she needed for the ID card. The relationship with the employers only deteriorated. She was constantly checked, and even the teenage daughters would hear her telephone conversations and report to the mother.

G.P. felt very isolated:

*Sundays, sometimes I would go out for a bit, sightseeing. What could I do with the small salary I earned? I would send money to my father, and that was it. Things got very serious, the work schedule, the surveillance, more and more work, ... but still, I didn't think of leaving. I was there. The only thing I wanted was that they [my employers would] pay me US 600 dollars, and I would stay. I kept asking them to raise my salary but got no answer. I kept thinking I would send \$300 dollars home and keep \$300. I could even save some.*

Throughout this period, even though she started thinking of leaving the job, G.P. was very scared. Having difficulties with the language, having no place to go, and most of all,

having been motivated by her premonitory dreams, G.P. clung to the reason why she came to this country and left everything behind. She wanted to open a business and build a house in Ecuador.

### **Networking: The Way to Casa in Search of Help**

G.P. started attending English classes where she met other Latinos, including other domestic workers. Through the friends she made at school, she started learning that the way she was being treated and her working conditions were abusive:

*They'd ask how much I earned, and when I told them US \$300 dollars, they would say, 'This is ridiculous; it is not legal. They are abusive.' There were others that also worked for diplomats. They [diplomats] are known to be abusive; they [these other Latinas] would tell me, and I started questioning all the lies my employers would tell me.*

Through one of the friends she made in school, G.P. met A.P. at a party, a long-term member of the women's group and eventually one of the leaders of the Committee. A.P. helped G.P. navigate the institutional requirements for some important paperwork, such as getting her Social Security and her ID cards, and, in the process helped G.P. to get around all the restrictions imposed by her employers. G.P. had to "steal" her own passport from where her employers had it hidden as they insisted she could not have it. It was through A.P. and her friends that G.P. heard about *Casa*.

One of her friends from the English classes, who was also in contact with *Casa*, worked for other Ecuadorians and was suffering through similar conditions of abuse. G.P.'s friend decided she wanted to be rescued by *Casa* and started planning it with A.P. and another *Casa* staff member who collaborated with the women's group. Communication was limited as they knew their telephone conversations were often heard.

At this point, G.P. had a boyfriend she had met at the school, J.S., who later became her husband and the father of her daughter. He gave her a cell phone and hid her passport for her. When *Casa*'s staff set a date and time for G.P.'s friend's rescue, G.P. became very scared. G.P.'s employers were acquainted with her friend's employers, which meant her employers would learn about the rescue of her friend. She thought the police might come after her and decided to call *Casa* and ask to be rescued on the same day as her friend and that is how it happened.

Because of the employers' diplomatic immunity,<sup>34</sup> the women have to be able to meet *Casa*'s staff outside the house and get their belongings out of the house before being picked up. At this point, G.P. had no idea that the events would be covered by the press and the media. She was all over the news!

*Casa* helped G.P. file a case against her employers, but unfortunately, they never managed to get them to pay what they owed her for violating the contract. Nonetheless, G.P. got legal help from American University, and they filed successfully for her residency on the basis of being a victim of human trafficking.

Once G.P. was out of the house, *Casa*'s network quickly gave support to G.P., and she went to stay at a friend's house in Virginia, while searching for a job. She managed to find part-time jobs at the service industry through *Casa*, that allowed her to pay for her bills, and she kept searching for a more stable job. Eventually, six years ago, G.P. secured her current job. She works for a Chinese family and takes care of their children. She also takes her one and half year-old daughter to work with her every day.

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<sup>34</sup> Immunity is extended to diplomat officers from the criminal and civil jurisdiction of their host state, based on the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961). See [www.duhaime.org/LegalDictionary/D/DiplomaticImmunity.aspx](http://www.duhaime.org/LegalDictionary/D/DiplomaticImmunity.aspx).

## **From Being Helped to Helping: Activism**

After the rescue, Antonia invited G.P. to attend the meetings at *Casa*. By then, M.E. was in charge and leading *Mujeres Unidas* (Women United). G.P. became an active part of the group, participating in the meetings and helping others:

*Before I came here, I had no idea. I lived in a 'pink' world, no idea of leadership, nothing. When I started attending the meetings at Casa, I realized there were many suffering the same abuse as I did. I started going, and then I really liked it, seeing that we could do something for these abused women. They would get to Casa in such awful conditions.*

At first, *Mujeres Unidas* was working towards the cooperative, and G.P. was part of this effort. When the cooperative project failed, she joined those within the women's group who started proposing fighting for a bill to protect domestic workers, and she helped form the Committee.

*It was here in Maryland, through Casa, that I learned that there is a domestic workers organization in my country, in Quito .... A.P. attended so many meetings as a representative of the Committee in other cities and countries, and in one of those, she met these women from Ecuador .... I had no idea of the possibility of fighting for one's rights back when I was in Ecuador. I was not even aware of our rights ....*

Currently, G.P. wants to become more active with the Committee again. She feels there is a lot of work to be done, particularly fighting for a place for the women to stay, take courses, gather, or even spend time on Sundays, as they often have nowhere to go outside their work. She complained about her lack of time, working all day and tending to her husband and daughter on the weekends, but she said:

*You just have to decide, and you find the time.*

At the same time, G.P. functioned as the safety net for her extended family in Ecuador. Not only does she have to send money to her parents, but every time there is a family crisis, her sisters, brothers and cousins turn to her for help:

*They [my family] think we [those who migrate] are rich when we come here ....  
We do earn much more than back home, but we also spend so much money just to  
get by here .... I always do what I can to help the family.*

### **Preliminary Comments**

G.P. started making her own decisions very early on. Once she was sent away from her parents' house to work in the nearby village, she started looking for better opportunities around her. She made her way to jobs that allowed her to study, and eventually, she moved to Quito for better economic opportunities. When G.P. decided to become independent, she managed to find jobs that did not require her to live in her place of employment. Then, she went on to fulfill her dream of migrating and living away from her country. Nonetheless, there was no awareness of being abused by her employers in Ecuador, by long work journeys and very low pay. There was no awareness of having rights as a worker and being able to exercise them. It was not until she came to the US and the promises made in her contract were broken, combined with networking with her peers, that she became aware of being a subject worthy of rights. G.P. learned and experienced exercising her rights through fighting her abusers. In turn, successfully exercising her rights led her to want to help others who suffer conditions of abuse similar to those she suffered.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Analyzing Narratives to Interpret the Context of Domestic Work**

As an introduction to the analysis and interpretation of my ethnographic data and the discussion of my findings, I would like to address briefly the way I worked with my ethnographic data, particularly the life history narratives.

The first step in the process was organizing and analyzing field notes that I had collected over the years through participant observation as a volunteer to the women's group. I then integrated my observations within the chronology of events I gathered from documentation and records from the organization itself (See Chapter 3).

Once I was ready to start my interviews, I contacted the first participant with whom I had established a closer relationship. We met several times, wherever she wanted to meet – her house, a café close to where she lives or for lunch in a place of her choice. I recorded all the interviews. I followed the same steps with the other four participants.

After finishing all the interviews, I started transcribing. This process of re-listening to the women's narratives and writing down our conversations provoked my first specific questions related to the data and were grounded in the research question that had guided my study which I repeat here: What are the factors conducive to female immigrants' collective mobilization for workers' rights? More specifically, what might be the factors in the women's life courses, that is, their lives in their countries of origin, their processes of migration and their lives in their host country, that account for mobilization?

The coding process provided another layer of reflection, given the richness of the life history narrative. Initially, I organized these women's histories chronologically, following the immigrant life cycle; however, while reflecting on their perspectives about

work I decided to go back to the narratives, revising codes and often adding links between them. This process of going back and forth between the raw data and the coded themes has allowed me to detect nuances that have contributed to my understanding of the processes of identity formation for these women workers. My findings show that these women's perceptions of themselves as workers in their countries of origin influence their decisions to migrate. Finally, I traced how these perceptions change again in response to the new place of residence. In other words, the identity constructed in connection to their role as domestic workers changes in consonance with the life cycle.

### **The Relevance of the Life Course**

The life history interview brings a processual perspective to the women's relationship to work – whether paid or unpaid – throughout their lives. The diachronic perspective of the life course of the immigrant women allowed me to delve into the multiple components of the women's self-perception as workers that are constantly negotiated in the new context.

I will now analyze the lives of the five women from the perspective of their work throughout their life cycle as immigrants, to first elicit the themes that emerge within each of their lives and then to compare those themes that are common across their life trajectories.

## Themes within life histories

### 1. M.L.

#### a. Country of Origin

*First Theme: Growing Up Working While Finishing a Technical Career (12<sup>th</sup> grade)*

Work is intrinsically part of M.L.'s identity and of her everyday life since her early childhood. She described her background as "very poor" though her father was an electrician and her mother almost finished secondary school. With eight children in the household, it was hard for them to thrive. M.L. worked at the family business, and as a young girl, she also had to do house work with her mother while trying to make time at night for her school-work.

*Second Theme: Clear Sense of Being Subject to Discrimination and Injustice*

M.L.'s narrative of her life in her home country, El Salvador, is charged with a sense of discrimination and injustice. She talks about being discriminated both at home, by her father that treated her differently, and socially, at school, because she was poor.

*Third Theme: Political Activism*

Although she tried hard to go to college, M.L. did not have the opportunity. While attending a technical school, the clandestine political movement against the military dictatorships arose and spread into the urban areas, mobilizing university and secondary school students. M.L. joined *la lucha* (the fight) and for years to come participated politically as a militant. After the peace agreements, she got a job with the federal government and joined the Federal Workers Union. Just one of thousands of low-income people who participated in the war, M.L. saw no change to the life conditions of the working class to which she felt she belonged.

*Fourth Theme: Financially In Charge of the Household*

The father of her first daughter was a militant and never took charge of the girl; she married again and had another daughter. Eventually, M.L. left her husband because he was unfaithful to her. Consequently, she became a single parent, economically in charge of the girls.

**b. Country of Residence**

*First Theme: Expectation Created by Migrating for Work*

M.L. came to the US to work as she was unemployed and had found no job in San Salvador. She knew how to and was willing to work in domestic service, which she had never done before, but the conditions she found, salary, schedule, etc., did not meet her expectations.

*Second Theme: Salary Not Enough*

The concept of *enough* is related to being able to send money home to provide for her daughters – and often help out her mother – and to support herself here, paying for her room, transportation, food, etc.

*Third Theme: Helplessness*

When faced with an abusive employer, M.L. felt she had nobody to turn to. One large factor in this perception was that she did not know the language and, a second, was that she didn't know how to access resources, a social service or network of people who could intervene on her behalf. This sense of isolation was further augmented by the fact that she overstayed her tourist visa, thus becoming undocumented, and also had no driver's license.

*Fourth Theme: Finding Her Peers – Women Workers at Casa*

Joining the group at *Casa*, first in search of a job and then the women's group, allowed M.L. to find support – other women who had suffered conditions of abuse. Through the group, she learned that as a worker she had rights, and *Casa* offered an institutional space of belonging to first search for better work conditions for herself and eventually for better conditions for all domestic workers in the area.

*Fifth Theme: Becoming an Activist for Domestic Workers' Rights – Mobilizing for Collective Rights*

M.L. was part of the founding of the Committee and an active participant in the process of drafting, lobbying and getting the domestic workers rights bill passed. Her narrative always referred to the experience she brought to the group, given her years as a political militant back home.

*Sixth Theme: Fulfilling the Expectation that drove the Decision to Migrate*

On a personal level, M.L. managed to get another job, with better pay and conditions, which allowed her to send money home to her two daughters and pay for her own expenses. As a member of the Committee, she was part of the successful struggle to pass the bill to protect domestic work and continues to support other women who arrive at *Casa* in search for help.

## 2. E.C.

### a. Country of Origin

*First Theme: Growing Up Working with No Pay – No Control over Own Life – No Schooling*

Ever since E.C. can remember, her mother made her take care of her younger siblings, which did not allow her to go to school. When she was around 12 years old, she was sent to work at a family friend's house for no pay – just room and board.

*Second Theme: Earning Money to Provide for Her Son*

E.C. had a son when she was a very young girl after being raped. She had to leave the baby to go to work, but it took her years to get a paid job, to be able to send money home to provide for her son.

*Third Theme: Finding a Way to Migrate in Search of a Better Life*

After years working as a domestic in Managua, under the prevailing harsh conditions of domestic work, which included working long 14 hour days, always being on call, and amassing very little pay that barely allowed her to send some money home, E.C. dreamed of coming to the US in search of a better life. She wanted to find a way to migrate with a visa. Eventually she was contacted by a family of foreigners who offered to bring her to the US with them.

*Fourth Theme: Two-Step Migration*

The family first moved to Costa Rica and took E.C. with them. The work relationship became abusive, but E.C. could fight for better conditions because the environment was friendly. E.C. did not depend on the family for her visa, and she spoke the language of the country.

## **b. Country of Residence**

### *First Theme: Expectations Not Met*

After working in Costa Rica for 5 years with the sole objective of moving to the US, the conditions she faced once she arrived did not meet her expectations at all. The employers became even more abusive as they realized that in the US she faced a very vulnerable condition.

### *Second Theme: Helplessness*

With no one to turn to, E.C.'s legal stay depended on the employers; she did not speak the language, did not know her way around and could barely go out because she had very little money left after sending some home to her son.

### *Third Theme: Searching for Help – Learning about Abuse and Rights*

E.C. started attending a meeting at a nearby church, which held events to keep domestic workers “out of the streets.” Connecting to other domestic workers, E.C. realized she had rights as a worker, and there were others who had already found their way out of their abusive jobs to better work conditions.

### *Fourth Theme: Getting Help*

E.C. contacted *Casa* through her acquaintances from the church, and together they planned and executed her *rescue*. She also got legal help from *Casa* after she left the house, to demand that the employers pay her the difference between her meager salary and the legally established hourly salary for the area.

*Fifth Theme: Joining the Women's Group Efforts*

E.C. worked with the women's group at *Casa* on different projects geared towards helping these immigrant women, through leadership courses and through developing and implementing a project for a cooperative to offer cleaning services.

*Sixth Theme: Becoming an Activist – Mobilizing for Collective Rights*

E.C. is a founding member of the Committee and was an active member through the process to promote and pass legislation to protect domestic work in Montgomery County.

*Seventh Theme: A Successful Story*

At the personal level, E.C. found a good job, and her new employer sponsored her to obtain US residency. She now has a job in which she feels respected. As part of the Committee, not only was the bill passed with her help, but also, M.L. helped *rescue* and provide support to many workers who, like her, were subject to abusive employers.

**3. H.L.**

**a. Country of Origin**

*First Theme: Unpaid Work Since Childhood – No Control Over Her Own Life – Some Years of Schooling*

H.L. defined herself as a peasant. She was sent to school for only a few years during her childhood; most of the time she worked with her mother tending to her younger brothers and sisters and doing household work. As a very young teenager, her father sent her away from her home to an aunt's house after prohibiting her marriage to a schoolmate who was also a neighbor. H.L. worked for years for her aunt and other relatives with no pay.

*Second Theme: With family, Financially In Charge but Still No Control Over Her Life*

H.L eventually married, largely because of her fear of staying alone for the rest of her life and working for relatives with no pay. She had eight children, and the husband did not work; he was “too pampered” by the women in his household, so H.L said she had to prepare goods to sell in order to survive, first selling *nixtamal* (the dough for tortillas), then selling food for the local school staff and teachers and, finally, selling bread she made at home, among other things.

*Third Theme: Political Activity Imposed by Husband*

When the military government allowed for the elections to take place after years of military rule, the political parties started organizing locally in the town where she lived, and H.L’s in-laws had been active members of the Liberal party. As her husband got involved in campaigning, she was called to join and help and eventually conceded, much against her will. She helped in providing food for the politicians who came by and worked with the women to support the party.

**b. Country of Residence**

*First Theme: Migrates in Response to Son’s Request*

When one of her sons established residency in the US with his American wife, and they had a daughter, H.L is asked to move to the US to take care of the child. She complied, partly out of curiosity and partly because, by then, her husband had died, her children were gone and she felt constantly harassed by some of the men in the community who realized she was very vulnerable.

*Second Theme: Works for the Son – Very Little Pay, No Respect*

H.L described a hard experience for the first two years she was in the US. She felt isolated, not respected by her son and his wife as she felt they would not let her live her life her way. She described becoming very depressed.

*Third Theme: Finds Way to Casa – Learning About Abuse and Rights*

H.L joined an English course in the evenings once her son and wife got back from work. There, she met people from *Casa*, who were offering the leadership courses. Though she is forced to go back to Honduras with her son when his wife is sent to work there, she argued that one of the main reasons she came back to the US was to join her leadership group again and to take her English classes.

*Fourth Theme: Becoming an Activist*

H.L joined the women's group through its different phases and eventually was a founding member of the Committee. She was elected president for one period and was always very active in the group.

*Fifth Theme: Becomes Independent*

H.L found a job outside her son's home and managed to earn enough to pay for her expenses and to finally make her own decisions.

**4. H.S.**

**a. Country of Origin**

*First Theme: Non-Paid Work – School Until She Was 15 Years Old*

H.S. recalled a childhood of hardships. Her father died when she was two years old, and her mother was in charge of her sister and herself. Though they both had to work

with their mother in the small room and board business they had, they managed to go to school until they were around fifteen years old when their mother passed away, and they had to take care of the business to make a living.

*Second Theme: After Marriage, Totally Dedicated to Family – No Work*

H.S. related that after she got married and had her children, she never worked again, not because her family did not need the money, as they went through periods of economic difficulties, but because socially it was not accepted (*no se usaba*).

*Third Theme: Years of Struggle After Husband's Migration for Work*

Remittances were variable during her husband's first years away in the US, and H.S. struggled to subsist. She related often that she never let others notice her struggles, so they wouldn't think her husband had abandoned her. But, she never worked during the fifteen years it took for her to be able to join her husband in the US.

**b. Country of Residence**

*First Theme: Finding Casa*

Shortly after arriving, H.S. received a flyer about the leadership courses offered at *Casa*. She found her way to *Casa* and took the courses many times, until she became the facilitator's assistant.

*Second Theme: Becoming Aware of Abuses and Rights*

Through the courses offered at *Casa*, H.S. started acknowledging the situations of abuse immigrant domestic workers were exposed to. Working as a volunteer for the courses at *Casa*, she also became aware of the possibilities of fighting for their legal rights.

*Third Theme: Becoming an Activist for Domestic Workers at Casa and Internationally*

H.S. was part of the women's groups from the very beginning and was a founding member of the Committee. During the year the Committee fought and won the passage of the bill to protect domestic workers, H.S. was the president. She tells many stories of abused women and how *Casa* helped them, and she has directly participated in many *rescues* and protests against abusive employers at international organizations and embassies, among other places. She has since participated as a representative for the group in international fora, such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) meeting as well as international meetings of national organizations of domestic workers, in an effort to promote a decent standard of work for domestic workers.

**5. G.P.**

**a. Country of Origin**

*First theme: Non-Paid Work – No School*

G.P. grew up in a rural area close to Esmeraldas, Ecuador, working in the house and tending to younger brothers and sisters until, at the age of thirteen, she was sent to the city to work as a domestic with an acquaintance of the family. During these years, she did not have the opportunity to attend school.

*Second theme: Live-In, Live-Out – The Search for Independence*

G.P. worked as a live-in domestic worker for years, first in Esmeraldas and then in Quito, the capital, where she found a higher paying job and managed to go school. After long work days, always being on call, not having enough money to send home and being only allowed to leave the house on Sundays, G.P. dreamed of a room of her own, even at

the cost of worsening economic conditions. Once her sister moved to the city to work as well, she managed to rent a room for both of them and to get a day job. Despite the incredible hardships she described, the move was an important accomplishment for her.

*Third Theme: Dreaming of Migrating for a Better Life*

G.P. related that she always had dreams about living in another country; mostly she thought she wanted to go to Italy. But once, she dreamed she had a ticket in her hand, and it said USA. She then sought the opportunity to go to the US, so when she was introduced to a family who was moving to the Washington DC area and was searching for a domestic worker to move with them, she accepted the job.

**b. Country of Residence**

*First Theme: Expectations Not Met*

As soon as G.P. moved to the US, she was told she was going to earn a third of what her contract stipulated and work Saturdays as well. She complained mostly that she did not earn enough to send home and pay her expenses in the US, but she had little awareness of being abused and/or having rights.

*Second Theme: Helplessness*

G.P.'s employers took away her passport, did not provide her with the documentation she needed for an identification card and did not let her get a social security card. She had no documents at all, did not speak the language and had very little money to get around.

### *Third Theme: Getting Help – Learning About Abuse and Rights*

Through English classes G.P. started attending, she met other Latina domestic workers who made her aware of the abuse she was suffering and told her about *Casa*. A group from Casa then eventually rescued her from her job.

### *Fourth Theme: Becoming an Activist*

After leaving her job, G.P. also got legal help from *Casa* to demand the money she was owed from her former employers. G.P. started attending the women's group that, by then, had been meeting for a while and had gone through different stages. She was a founding member of the Committee and participated throughout the process of drafting and fighting for the bill to protect domestic workers.

## **Themes Across Life Histories**

The richness found in these life history accounts provided me with a look at similarities and differences among the women's life experiences with work. Additionally, their narratives allowed me to explore the variety of ways these women navigated their new context in their country of residence to become activists for the rights of domestic workers.

### 1. *Work in the Country of Origin*

The first common theme is that all the women come from poor backgrounds. Three of them were born and grew up in rural areas as peasants, moved to the city and then migrated abroad. Access to school was harder for them, and the demand to work at home was prioritized. M.L. and H.S., in turn, were born in cities, in the capitals of their

originating countries, and each went to school for twelve and nine years respectively. All the women recalled growing up and working in the household, tending to siblings, and often also working in the fields or in the family business. E.C. said:

*No, my biological mother did not send me to school .... I had to take care of her children ....*

M.L. also commented:

*I used to go to school at six am until twelve pm, and when I got home, I had to do all the work I was asked; otherwise, I couldn't do anything else .... I'd go to bed so late ....*

In their early teenage years, E.C., H.S and G.P. were sent by their parents to work elsewhere in domestic service with no pay. M.L. and H.S. would work at the family businesses. E.C. described the experience of being sent away when she was thirteen years old:

*When I got to this house, I worked from four in the morning, and often, we would go to bed at ten, eleven at night .... I didn't get paid for the three years I worked there.*

H.S. described her case:

*When my mother passed away, I had just started my eighth grade in school and had to drop out so my sister and I could take care of the room and board business. We had [to work] full time to make a living.*

The second common theme that emerges from the women's narratives is the lack of having much control, in most cases, over the decisions about their lives. Beyond the hardships that often drive life decisions, other social conditions such as family expectations, the performance of gender roles and the prevailing social values were often recognized by the women as having the most significant influence over their life choices in their countries of origin. Here are some of the ways in which they expressed it. H.S. said:

*Back in those days, once a woman was married, she did not work anymore outside the house .... We had to be dedicated to the husband and the kids.*

Similarly, she talked about her fears of what other people would think if they found out her husband didn't send her enough money:

*Well, the first thing they [the neighbors] were going to say was, 'Look, he [the husband] has abandoned her, left her starving' ... so I would go to the market with a dime. But, nobody would know.*

About her marriage, H.S. commented:

*No ... I was never in love with my husband, who was my uncle .... He insisted, and I accepted .... I had to please my uncle .... I had to be good as always.*

In the two cases that the women did not marry in their home countries, E.C. and G.P., they were able to seize some control and decide to migrate because they wanted to.

The third theme relates to the fact that despite not being in control of their own lives, the women were financially in charge of family, be it extended family or their own children and husband. M.L. said:

*When I lost my job, I had no alternative, first because I was a mother alone with two daughters. The only option I saw was to come here, so they [my daughters] could make a living and study.*

E.C. commented:

*I had to look for another job because they [my employers] paid me nothing, and I had to send money to my mother to feed my son.*

H.S. also expressed:

*But then, he [the husband] did not like to work .... I had to work double .... I had to work in the house, take care of the kids and work at home to make things I could sell.*

The fourth and last theme refers to the lack of awareness of workers' rights. Except for M.L., who worked for the Federal government in her country and joined the Union, the others had no awareness of existing labor legislation that at least established a minimum wage and a limit to the work day. The abuses they were subject to as domestic

workers were normalized by their social environments. In their narratives, they described how this normalization was negotiated within their day-to-day contexts. E.C. said:

*After the triumph of the revolution [Sandinist movement], the law established that we had the right to work eight hours, but nobody abided by it .... People [employers] are so used to having people work very long hours, and the workers are used to putting up with it .... We never complained; we were scared also. They [the workers] don't have the information, and even if they do, there is no where to go and place a demand.*

Talking about another domestic worker from *Casa*, she further commented:

*This girl was just like all of us in our countries, working in the houses, and we learn that we have to say 'yes, madam, no madam' all the time. And, we are used to doing what we are told.*

G.P. commented on the relationship with her employer in Quito:

*I thought that they did not mistreat me .... I wore my uniform, did my job, worked long hours, but we did not know any better; we thought it was normal. They had parties, and it was normal that we worked through late at night with no extra pay .... Nobody knew there was such thing as extra pay ....*

## 2. *Why Migration*

For the five women, the common reason for migrating is the search for a better income although in different ways. While E.C. and G.P. actively decided to search for an opportunity to migrate to earn a better income, M.L. and H.S. were forced to migrate because of the lack of work opportunities. In turn, H.S. moved to the US following her husband who had left for the US when he was unemployed and could not make a living.

## 3. *Work in the Country of Residence*

The first theme that emerges from the women's narratives when they talk about their life in the country of residence is the lack of congruence between their expectations of migration and the actual outcomes. With the exception of H.S., who came here to join her husband, the women's experiences in the country of destination were harsh. In a way,

H.S.'s description of her husband's experience upon arrival in the US was similar to that of the other women. Not only did he have a hard time finding a stable job, but it took him nine years to get his residence, instead of the year he had planned it would take.

G.P. talked about her first impressions upon arrival:

*When I arrived here, the first thing they told me was that I was going to earn \$300 dollars and work from Monday to Saturday. I got here on July 11<sup>th</sup> and started working, and the problems arose right away. I started early and finished late every day, and if I wanted to go out, she [the employer] would say: 'Where are you going? What are you going to do?' I had to ask permission to go out the door.*

H.S. also related her disappointment upon arrival:

*I got here with a visa and all, but one always suffers in this country; I stopped hearing, speaking. They [my son and daughter-in-law] would not let me do anything. They paid me very little. I became very depressed.*

The second theme is the sense of helplessness. Combined with the deception of not finding in the new place of residence what they expected, they found themselves in another country, in a different environment, with a new culture and language, not knowing their way around and having nobody to turn to. M.L. described her feelings:

*When you arrive in a new place, you don't know the laws; you don't know your rights; and anybody can take advantage of you. I had no place to go. I only had a friend, and she had a husband. I couldn't go there all the time.*

E.C. also commented on her feelings of helplessness:

*I really became so desperate because I had only one pair of pants [and] one blouse because I had to send home the crumbs that were left after she [the lady I worked for] supposedly deducted taxes from my meager salary. I had no money to go out, and I was scared, no English, such a big city ....*

The third theme is acknowledging situations of abuse and learning about their rights. Through different ways, when the women established contact with others outside the household, the context of the interaction changed and their identity as immigrant women

workers began to be shaped by the negotiation between their perception of self they bring with them and that offered by the new context at the very local level.

The women described these first interactions with others outside the realm of the house. G.P. related her experience:

*I was allowed to attend English classes, and, you know, in these schools, they [other participants] open your eyes about everything. You learn about things you could not imagine .... They started asking me [about my experiences], and they would say 'How much are you earning? Oh, this is outrageous! It is a swindle! They [your employers] are abusive.'*

In her case, shortly upon arrival, H.L. learned about courses for women at *Casa* and joined. She described the experience:

*In the beginning I joined the leadership course for women, so we women started getting together, many with problems with work, violence. And, little by little, we were learning about self-esteem, about our own worth. We didn't even imagine we could have rights; in cases of domestic violence, abusive employers that didn't pay, we just didn't think we had rights.*

E.C. told her story too:

*Then, I started attending the meetings organized by the Opus Day, which I learned [about] through a girl I met on the bus. They offered mass in Spanish for the Hispanics, and there I met this Colombian girl .... She told others about the problems she had at work, and someone from the group gave her information about Casa .... and one day, I saw in the news that Casa had rescued her and was helping her. And, I thought, 'If she can, why can't I?'*

It is the interaction at the very local context that instigates a different perception of self.

The fourth theme is that the women move from mobilizing for their own rights to mobilizing for collective rights, joining the women's group and later founding the Committee to advocate for a bill to protect domestic workers. G.P. commented:

*It was very motivating to see that so many women who had suffered got help and could exercise their rights and build a better life for themselves.*

E.C. also described how she started helping others:

*This is the reason why we got to where we are, to join the group and the fight, because I keep thinking, 'How many are out there living through what I lived?'*

She continued:

*... right now, I am seeing the problems people have because they lack information about their rights, so I want to disseminate it [this knowledge] to as many women as I can.*

Finally, the last theme that emerges is that with time, the five women managed to fulfill the expectation that drove the decision to migrate in the first place and, consequently, have moved on from the private space of household work to the public sphere of activism for the rights of domestic workers. Their work as activists implies contributing to draft legislation that addresses the specificities of domestic service, to seek support for the bill, to lobby for the bill and after its approval by the Montgomery county council, to keep disseminating the legislation. In so doing, they are promoting domestic workers' organizations nationally and internationally, while at the same time, on a day-to-day basis, helping women to overcome abuse and encouraging them to join the efforts of the Committee.

M.L. finally managed to find a job where she felt she was treated fairly:

*I take care of two children, also from Bolivia. They are cousins. I am only in charge of the children; I don't have to clean or do anything else. They treat me well; they pay me the holidays .... This past 4<sup>th</sup> of July was my first holiday ever [that I celebrated] since I have been in the US ....*

At the same time, once M.L. joined *Casa*, she took advantage of other opportunities. She joined the health promotion program at *Casa*, and after taking the training, she became a "health promoter."<sup>35</sup> The job entailed working mostly on weekends, which did not conflict with her week day job. She also sent money to her daughters in El Salvador who were about to graduate and managed to pay her bills.

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<sup>35</sup> According to *Casa's* webpage, health promoters are trained to reach out to the community to promote health education, improved access to screening, and treatment services for HIV, cancer and tobacco use prevention.

E.C. managed to find another job, where she has been working for the past 6 years.

She described her current job situation as a place:

*... where I feel they respect me.*

During the years she has been with these employers, they helped her apply for and get her residency. She described how the relationship with her employers evolved:

*Look, I tell you, the truth is that this is a job that when I had just arrived there were many conflicts, but she [the employer] has learned to respect me. And, I have come to understand her better .... She really respects me, and I feel good that they [her husband and her] value what I am doing at their house and take into account my opinion ....*

H.S. was very proud of her accomplishments both as an activist and as a worker. She commented:

*I invited all my friends at work to come to the party to celebrate the approval of the bill with us. Then, I showed them the picture in the newspaper; they could not believe it .... They were astonished to see me in the papers ....*

H.S. was always busy with her activities that entailed *Casa's* group, the Union at work and the church, among others. Although she complained about her current jobs because she got tired, she was happy to be independent and building up her pension for the future.

She said:

*I love my freedom; I don't want to depend on anybody or be told what to do.*

H.S. has been to different places representing the Committee. She has become a full time activist for the rights of domestic workers at the national and international level. She found it fulfilling to help women overcome abuse and improve their self-esteem through promoting and supporting organizations of domestic workers and international legislation that protect their rights. It had become a priority in her life.

G.P. has been working in her current job for the past six years. She works for a Chinese family and takes care of their children. She is now married and has a one and

half year-old baby girl who she takes to work with her every day. She says she works hard, but she is respected and well paid. With two incomes in the house, G.P. and her husband are able to make a living and send money home to their families.

In general, all the cases are successful. *Casa*'s intervention led to change in these women's individual lives as well as wanting to work to help others also achieve change, looking more towards collective change.

## **Findings**

The themes clearly demonstrate that domestic work is related to poverty, gender and human mobility. In addition, the five life histories provide a scope of the condition of being a poor girl/woman in these Latin American countries as well as the different ways in which these girls/women move away, as internal and international migrants, from their condition. Overall, my main ethnographic finding is that domestic work is experienced in new ways in different contexts and/or conditions, irrespective of legislation. In order to unpack this conclusion further, I offer my analysis.

The women's life courses show that their childhood and adolescence is linked to unpaid domestic work at home and often elsewhere. Although it is common to all of them, they bring different contexts to the experience. For the women that were born in rural areas to peasant families, domestic work in their own house meant often not going to school or only attending for very few years, not only because of accessibility issues but also because the housework was very demanding. It also meant developing skills different than those required from domestic workers in urban areas. Here, I noticed the first adaptation to an internalization of domestic work. The women in the rural areas were

not only involved in tending to siblings and cleaning but also in grinding grains, fetching water, taking care of the animals, etc. Once the rural women move to an urban area to work as domestics, they have to learn how to respond to the new demands, though it is always assumed that a girl knows domestic work, which makes this transition even more painful for the young girls. With this cultural dynamic at play, the girl's construction of female identity is formed through the lens of female responsibility, domestic work especially representing a gendered and socio-economic given. This reality circumscribes how these women understand themselves as well as the social and psychological boundaries of their expectations and experiences for the future.

The prevalence of internal migration, which is often a first step in international migration, is evident in the women's stories. Around the age of thirteen, they are sent to work outside the house as either paid or unpaid laborers. Domestic work is often the only option that girls coming from rural areas have to enter the labor market, given the low level of education and few marketable skills. The urgency to send the girls away is linked to the lack of family income to support them and the need to have them generate some income to send home, even when it implies a few years without pay. As soon as they start earning some money, the priority is to send money home. With education being a limited option, work then takes on a dual aspect, being both the hallmark of their identity as someone who knows how to take care of and manage a household as well as a mechanism for survival.

However, there is a shift in their perception of what's possible when they become more urbanized. The women's narratives also show that those working as domestics in urban areas often move to larger cities, in these cases the capitals of the respective

countries, and with time, they learn their way around and navigate the domestic work market towards better paid jobs.

The women's life histories show that conditions of domestic work in the countries of origin are exploitative, implying long work schedules, being on call all the time, mistreatment and disrespect, and being paid the lowest salaries in the job market. Nonetheless, these conditions are considered normal, both by employers and by domestic workers themselves, as expressed in the narratives. The relationship established between the employer and the domestic worker is of submission. Except for the day off, they are immersed in the employer's family life and have no freedom of movement. Ideologies of treating domestic workers as "one of the family," as the women narrate, comes with obligations required of a relative and contribute to undervaluing household work and not recognizing domestic labor as work or as a real job. In this sense, domestic work is further relegated to a gendered sphere where the boundaries between work, home, and exploitation are blurred. Work is not the dominant narrative here so much as "family." These women are understood to be much like that of the role of a wife and/or mother but without the intimacy, affection, and/or mutual respect/consent. Work operates both in the realm of survival and in the realm of imposed familial obligations.

International migration greatly changes this perspective. The five women's decision to migrate takes place during a period (end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s) of massive migration movements from these countries to the US and Europe, particularly Spain and Italy. The fact that migration is an option for these women at all, and that two of them even set it as their goal, can be explained by cultural traditions and social

practices that are conducive to a culture of emigration to *the North*.<sup>36</sup> In other words, lack of opportunities, unemployment and poverty are not enough to make people move; migration must be an option available for them in the social practices of their national cultures (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011). Again, the boundaries of what their world can offer as a female, domestic worker are limited, but since social norms offer the option of migration, this changes the dimensions of “work” for these women, first in terms of what they can offer their families and then, later, in terms of what they can expect for themselves. To begin, the possibility of migrating must be present in their social imagining, be it through a direct link established with people who have migrated prior to them or through the prevalence of the practice around them that allows them to consider it in their imagined options. While M.L. contacted a close friend who migrated some years back, E.C. referred to “...all the people who had left Nicaragua because of the lack of opportunities,” and G.P. dreamt of living in Italy, one of the preferred destinations of Ecuadorians at the time. Likewise, H.L. was brought by her son and H.S. by her husband.

When migration becomes an option available to the women as a common social practice in their context, it nourishes expectations. I argue that in the case of the women presented here, their narratives indicate that although they are moved by the idea of a better income, they cannot be allured by better conditions of work since there was little awareness of being subject to exploitative conditions in their countries of origin. This awareness comes later as the women interact with the notion of work in their new context, their new country of residence.

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<sup>36</sup> *Going North* is a common expression among Latin American migrants, which refers to migrating mainly to the US but also refers to Europe – *North* becomes equivalent to *developed*.

The first encounter with work in the US does not correspond to the expectations that moved them to leave their home countries. Earning much less money than expected means the women cannot send enough money home nor pay for their most basic expenses in the new context. Although they refer lengthily to abusive conditions of work, they only emphasize their plight for a better salary. Even H.S., who comes to the US to work for her son, complains about the meager salary she got.

Being in an environment alien to them, having left their homeland behind and not getting what they were hoping for led to their sense of helplessness. Their sense of self had been built on the premise that moving would give them the resources to better provide for family members in their countries of origin. However, my data suggests that while seeking to fulfill their original motivation for migration as a means of earning more money, their social practices allow them to articulate their experiences to the world outside the household where they work.

As we have seen above, the social practices in their new context come to them through their very local contact with other Latina immigrant women like them. Through English language school, church, on the bus, and in one case, through *Casa's* outreach efforts, these women establish relationships to peers with whom they exchange information about their work conditions. Contacting others like themselves is facilitated by identifying a *sameness* among them that allows for them to recognize themselves in each other, which is simultaneously imposed by the new environment that categorizes them as Latinas.

It is precisely through these interactions that they become aware of different conditions available to others like them, and thus, they become aware of themselves and acknowledge their situations of abuse. They start to see themselves as “workers” who add

a value to society and should be treated according to their contribution, not just because they are obligated to be “honorary” family members in traditional household/domestic positions that had typically placed their contribution to society more in the realm of what a female family member was culturally responsible to give.

As the relationship to the new environment evolves, they also learn they have rights and that there are ways to fight for them. They learn about other women who have been in similar situations and have found their way to get help and eventually get a better job.

Through this process, they start negotiating their identity as immigrant women workers with the new context. Perceiving themselves as workers rather than domestics, they understand that they have the right to better conditions of work and accept *Casa*'s role as a broker institution that helps them leave abusive work environments.

The five narratives relate the different ways the women arrived at *Casa*, how they got help and how they moved eventually to getting involved in different activities the organization offered. While E.C., H.L and H.S. came to *Casa* towards the end of the 1990s and joined the leadership courses that were offered back then, M.L. and G.P. joined *Casa* around 2004, when the women's group *Mujeres Unidas* was operating. At the same time, E.C. and G.P. also got legal help from *Casa* to demand their former employers pay salaries owed to them.

As contact with the new context broadens through *Casa*, and these women managed to move to better jobs, I argue that their identity is forever transformed to an identity as workers, and that this identity becomes constantly reshaped as they perceive themselves and are perceived as workers with rights. Through work, the boundaries of their world and how they construct their identity are forever expanded.

For the five women, moving from seeking help for themselves -- as individuals -- to mobilizing for collective rights -- other women like them -- involves first moving from having experienced abuse most of their lives in a context where it was normalized to obtaining legislated jobs that imply conditions and rights in a new context. Second, it involves seeking to help others become aware of their rights and the possibilities that lead to different lives, to forming a committee to create awareness for the conditions of domestic work.

Thus, in negotiating their identities as workers through their life courses, these women move from perceiving domestic work as part of their obligation as girls and then as women to perceiving themselves as workers with rights. Domestic work is then perceived as a job as dignifying as any other. The fact that they can now perform the same job under regulated conditions, that limits the scope of work in their everyday lives and allows them to dedicate time to their personal lives and to lead activities outside of work, contrasts with their previous work experiences of being continually “on call” and with hardly any “time off.” Further, this change distances domestic work from its historical link to servitude, as it operates with the prevailing labor regulations.

### **Findings in Relation to the Literature on Domestic Work**

Parallel to the increasing participation of women in migration worldwide and their insertion in the growing domestic service sector since the 1990s, social science researchers have paid increasing attention to studying immigrant women and domestic work from differing perspectives.

The first studies of immigrant domestic workers focused primarily on the relevance of paid domestic labor as a window into race, class and gender, emphasizing the relationship between employer and employee as the loci where vulnerability and privilege were negotiated to determine the conditions of work (Romero, 1992). Scholars also paid attention to the complexity of strategies developed by employers and employees to assure, on one hand, that the work gets done and, on the other, that workers resist exploitation, negotiating conflicting class positions (Hondagneu-sotelo, 1994, 2001).

Taking the domestic service employer-employee relationship to a global level, studies also point to emerging class and racial inequalities derived from the intersection of labor supply in poor countries and the increasing demand for reproductive labor by affluent two career families in the developed world, which places immigrant workers in different parts of the world under similar conditions (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Bridget Anderson, 2000; Chang, 2000).

Scholars agreed that work conditions are shaped by immigration status, live-in and live-out arrangements, state regulations and by the personal relationship between employer and employee. Furthermore, it is argued that there is a dialectic relationship between discipline and resistance in the lives of domestic workers in which resistance often involves conforming to the discipline imposed by the institutions involved in establishing the conditions of work for domestics, i.e., the state, employment agencies and employers themselves (Constable, 1997; Salazar Parrenas, 2001; Bridget Anderson, 2000).

Recently, scholars have taken a human rights based approach, addressing the way immigrant women in domestic work evolve through the process of migration in the

country of residence to understanding the conditions necessary for rights consciousness to emerge in the new environment. These scholars conclude that “...the length of the migratory experience, migrants’ cultural and social capital and the opposition to conditions in the country of origin greatly influence an awareness of rights and a sense of entitlement in migrant women” (Mora and Piper, 2011: 15).

This ethnographic study contributes to the literature on domestic work and migration by examining the subjective aspects of the experience for Latina immigrant workers, specifically examining how these women evolve across their life courses in their role as activists, mobilizing for their rights as workers. Adding to the human rights based approach, this study focuses on the evolving agency of the women through the lens of their own words, how their narratives unpack conditions in their countries of origin and reveal how those experiences interact with their new contexts in the US. The result is that the women articulate how domestic work conditions are understood and experienced from their perspective, specifically through the relationship between poverty, human mobility and gender at a local and national level.

The experiences of the women allows researchers to understand how this relationship shapes their lives as domestic workers as they navigate different social contexts, from rural areas, where child domestic labor is a common practice, to urban centers in their country of origin, where exploitation and abuse is normalized, to crossing national borders to a new country, where they establish residence and find their way to exercising their rights and mobilizing for the collective rights of domestic workers.

In crossing national boundaries, these women relate their disappointments and hardships and ultimately show how these defeats became meridian points for later

awareness and for personal success. My study further suggests that in order for women to internalize the information on regulations and to perceive of themselves as rights holders, they have to connect to a network of peer immigrants, who not only provide the information but the lived experience of exercising their rights, showing them, at the same time, the pathway to follow.

## Chapter 10

### Conclusions

#### *The Relevance of the Case Study for Understanding Domestic Work Globally and Locally*

Domestic work is a growing sector of employment, particularly for women at a global level. According to the latest International Labor Organization (ILO, 2010) estimates, there are tens of millions of domestic workers across the globe. Due to the fact that this kind of work is often hidden and unregistered, the total number of domestic workers could be as high as 100 million. The ILO also states that 83% of domestic workers are women, and many are migrant workers.<sup>37</sup>

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the need to address the invisibility of domestic work and to search for ways to better protect workers around the globe. One of the most important outcomes has been the adoption, in 2011 by the ILO, of the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers, which recognizes domestic laborers as having the same rights as other workers.<sup>38</sup>

Although they represent an important segment of the labor force, and their work is often a means to improve living standards of those who employ them, domestic workers are in many cases not protected by legislation or are often insufficiently protected. In 2007, the ILO reported that most domestic workers have long and even excessive

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<sup>37</sup> Reliable data is scarce. According to the ILO, data on domestic work is hard to collect because of the high incidence of undeclared domestic work and the consequent under-reporting of the varying definitions and the fact that national statistics often do not count domestic workers as a distinct category and register them under headings such as community, social and personal service activities. For more information see [http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2009/109B09\\_24\\_engl.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2009/109B09_24_engl.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> For more information see the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention\\_on\\_domestic\\_workers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_on_domestic_workers).

working schedules, receive low wages, and are seldom covered by any health insurance or social security plan. Domestic workers form a significant group within the growing informally and/or inadequately protected global workforce where employers often ignore laws. In turn, governments often fail to enforce them (ILO, 2009).

Domestic work is also closely related to child domestic labor, both in terms of household work performed by girls since a very early age, interfering often with school attendance, and in terms of girls being placed in other homes to do housework, mostly unpaid. Families living in poverty provide a context in which child labor is part of a survival strategy. For female children, they either work in the house to alleviate the mother's burden or outside the house to bring some money home and/or, at least, to be taken care of by somebody else. They are particularly hidden workers and among the most difficult to survey (Kane, ILO, 2004).

Domestic work and poverty are deeply intertwined. It has become an important option, often the only one, for low-income women to enter the labor market. With few formal jobs available and facing gender discrimination, often coupled with discrimination based on caste or class, race or ethnicity, their options for decent work are few. And, as most are from poor households, they generally have low levels of education and few marketable skills, other than their skills in housekeeping and caring for others. Cleaning and cooking and looking after children and the elderly is almost universally regarded as women's work, which means that men rarely compete with women in this job market. Domestic work is therefore one of the few employment opportunities open to poor women (Pearce et al., 2011; Ramírez-Machado, 2003).

Domestic work is also often the only option for migrant women who continue to migrate and work as domestics in every region of the world, and even when it cannot be said that negative conditions prevail only in sending countries, many migrant women are still improving their lives through domestic work and sending remittances to the family left behind. They generate a better income that allows them to send money home as well as make a living in the country of residence.

In the Americas, recent research shows that domestic working immigrants are increasingly organizing to mobilize for their collective rights in their receiving countries. In the US, Montgomery County in the state of Maryland as well as New York State have both recently passed legislation to protect domestic work as a result of the efforts of organized groups of domestics and supporters of those groups. A National Organization of Domestic Workers was recently founded and has met regularly to develop an agenda at the national level to create visibility for the domestic workers' plight and to promote mobilization for their rights. At the international level, the organization has also been represented in international meetings such as the one organized by the ILO in June 2010 to discuss domestic work as decent work (Mitchell, 2010; ILO, 2010). Elsewhere in the Americas, some examples are organizations of Peruvian women both in Chile (Mora and Piper, 2011) and in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Canevaro, 2008).

Through my case study, I have analyzed the life histories of five low-income Latina immigrant women to show how domestic work is interconnected to dimensions of poverty, human mobility and gender. Though studies of domestic work from a global perspective point to the same interrelationship as described above (ILO 2004, 2007), they fail to provide insight on the different ways women live domestic work, from their

pathways into domestic service, their lived experiences as immigrant women workers and their transition to becoming activists. This ethnographic data allows researchers to further understand the social practices pertaining to domestic work in national cultures, the conditions that lead to migration and the possibilities of doing the same work under different conditions when the women move across national borders. In presenting their voices, this research seeks to make visible a population that is often not as accessible, specifically a population that carries the memories of young girls who grew up with the culture of domestic work and then become women who have internalized and lived it over many years of their lives.

Furthermore, this study provides valuable information for policy development at the local level. While research from the global perspective provides the general global picture of the situation of migrant domestic workers, pointing to the need to promote decent work standards, the lived experience of the women point to specific needs that also have to be addressed at the policy level. These can only be fully understood by including the immigrant women's input as part of the discussion in developing strategies to protect the specific needs that domestic work entails and in order to formulate effective policies.

### ***Looking Back to Move Forward: Implications of Ethnographic Findings for Transnational Research***

As discussed in chapter one, transnational theories have contributed largely to understanding immigrants' experiences and have become an indispensable part of any analysis of immigrant communities and identities across the globe. Nonetheless, a

number of scholars working with Latina immigrant women have argued for conceptual tools that address transnational migration as a nuanced process and, consequently, the need to document the diversity of experiences. I suggest that my ethnographic study contributes to the development of conceptual tools that allows for the documentation of these nuanced processes that immigrant women experience. I accomplish this by studying the process of formation of transnational identities throughout the life course.

This study suggests that the women's life long relationship to work is the lens through which they understand and make sense of the new environment, while negotiating new perceptions of self in a context that fosters the emergence of awareness of rights and the possibility of exercising them.

### *Next Steps*

The ethnographic findings of this study suggest that countries that receive sizeable flows of immigrant women that work in domestic service open up an avenue for research on the culture of work at the national level and how it reaches and shapes immigrant domestic workers' perception of their work and their construction of identity.

Broadening the scope of my study, I propose developing multi-sited research, to further explore transnational immigrant identity from the perspective of the life course in the context of the globalization of domestic work and to focus on countries where immigrant women organizations' advocacy efforts for their rights as domestic workers is growing.

Based on team-work with scholars interested in domestic work and migration in receiving countries, I propose designing an ethnographic study using life history narratives to bring new insights in the cultures of work at local and national levels.

## Glossary

**Definition of Hispanic or Latino Origin Used in the 2010 Census:** “Hispanic or Latino” refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.

**Domestic Workers:** According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2010), domestic work is one of the oldest and most important occupations for many women in many countries. It is linked to the global history of slavery, colonialism and other forms of servitude. Care work in the household – whether performed by paid employees or by unpaid household members as part of their family responsibilities and as part of what is often paternalistically referred to as a *labor of love* – is quite simply indispensable for the economy outside the household to function, states the ILO in its Report entitled *Decent Work for Domestic Workers* (2010). Domestic workers are paid a wage to assume a range of gendered family responsibilities in private homes. The home is the workplace. Domestic workers may cook, clean, take care of children, the elderly, the disabled, or even domestic animals – tasks that may not be closely defined at the outset and may vary widely over time.

**Hispanics:** The Hispanic label was coined for the first time in the census of 1970 in order to fit large number of people within one heterogeneous category. Although Latin Americans in the US might consider the term “Hispanic” as alien to their identity, they have had to accept the term used by others to define them. Hispanic implies an affiliation with the Spanish colonial heritage that not necessarily supersedes the various national cultures but obscures facts such as that many Central and South Americans identify more strongly with their Indian roots than with the Spanish ancestry, or that some Latin American countries of origin, such as Brazil and Haiti, do not have Spanish as the national language.

**Immigrants:** In general, those who reside in a country other than where they were born. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) classify immigrants in four groups: The first group is constituted by labor migrants, who are foreign workers in search of low paid jobs. The second group is professional immigrants who mostly come legally to high skilled jobs. The third is composed of entrepreneurial immigrants who bring business expertise and capital, and the last group is constituted by refugees and asylum seekers. The participants in this study are labor immigrants, documented and undocumented, who work in low paid jobs such as domestic work in the Washington DC Metropolitan area.

**Latina:** For the purpose of this proposed study, Latina will be used to refer to any woman that lives in the US and traces her origin to Latin America including the Caribbean, independently of place of birth. Similarly, Latina immigrant will refer to first generation immigrants born in Latin America, residing in the US.

**Latinos:** The term “Latino/a” emerged as an option to “Hispanic”, and actually represented a progressive strategic and class view. Though the term solved some problems involved with the label “Hispanic”, as for instance incorporating literally all

countries in Latin America that do not speak Spanish, the term carries political meaning. It is borne out of contesting “Hispanic” as an imposed term. As Fox states “...the main objection to “Hispanic” is that it comes as a ready-made term, already loaded with cultural associations...this is why “Latino” is favored by some intellectuals and others who consider themselves progressive. But any name tends to freeze the meanings of something which is actually a process, a rapidly evolving complex of understandings and relationships (1996:6).”

**Life history/life stories:** Gelya Frank (1995) presents an interesting distinction between life histories and life stories. The former focus on diachronic change within anthropology’s traditional paradigm of realism; whereas, the latter pays attention to cultural scripts and narrative devices individuals use to make sense of experience. Working from this latter definition, I have collected, interpreted, and presented life stories for my research project.

**Work:** For the purpose of this study, it encompasses all human activity to satisfy the most basic needs. Following anthropologists Durrenberger and Marti, it is what humans do and “...thus provides a window for understanding all human behavior” (2006: 1). For the research participants, work provides for the fulfillment of material needs, and they migrated for this very reason. Throughout the interviews, the women referred to the centrality of work in their lives. M.L. comments: “Work is necessary since if I do not work, I do not eat,” while E.C. says “I have to work because I have to eat, pay rent, and send money to my family.” The women also identified non-tangible benefits of work in both the discovery and assertion of self.

**Work Abuse:** I use this term to refer to when one is being submitted to conditions that violate widely accepted work regulations. It also refers to violation of basic human rights while at work, that implies psychological, physical or sexual violence. Related terms are mistreatment and discrimination.

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